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Pak Lah a born conciliator

Abdullah Ahmad

DATUK Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi was born and brought up in the little town of Kepala Batas, where his grandfather was a well-known ulama and his dad, Datuk Haji Ahmad Badawi Abdullah Fahim, a prominent politician in Penang and beyond.

The degree to which Pak Lah imbibed from his pedigree that Islam and modernisation were not incompatible is completely evident.

At a time when there were not too many persons in Umno with a religious education who were considered of some potential, he became MP for his home town in 1978 and, eventually, Prime Minister.

I have known Pak Lah for more than three decades, and his dad was in the Umno supreme council together with me. We were both Tun Razak's nominees in 1976. Tun Razak sent me to Seberang Prai to persuade Ahmad Badawi to accept Datuk Sopiee Ibrahim as the Barisan Nasional parliamentary candidate for Kepala Batas in the 1974 general election.

Ahmad Badawi had another candidate, a local man, in mind. Though obviously uncomfortable, he agreed with Tun Razak's choice. That was the measure of the man when it came to the party's interests.

Two of the images I took with me to a good night's sleep on Friday were the big smile on Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's face as he clocked out for the last time at the Prime Minister's Department in Putrajaya and Pak Lah's silently uttered prayers during the oath-taking ceremony at the Istana Negara.

Now, I am not an expert at reading tea leaves, but there were signs enough for the mavens at the start of this new chapter in the country's history. The nation has been abuzz - for the last few days everybody, and I mean everybody, has turned into political cognoscenti.

That is the first good omen: ordinary people are re-engaging in the leadership process. It might not be easily noticed through the hurly-burly of their daily lives, but I imagine every Malaysian shuffling choices and forging judgments.

A change at the top always forces a rethink, and a redeployment of capacities to meet new challenges is politics at its best.

The transfer of power had been scripted to wonderful effect. It was brisk and understated. Even then, most of the media, both local and foreign, heaved mightily to lift Oct 31, 2003 beyond the ordinary.

Many people shed tears and stood in stunned silence, and not just those old enough to have tracked Dr Mahathir's long career. Even the young - the swelling demographic said to have clamoured loudest for reform in the 1999 general election - were swept by emotion.

Many of them, I'm told, had expected a public holiday on Dr Mahathir's last day in office. As it happened, they had to curi tulang to catch snatches of the live telecast during the day.

Dr Mahathir would not have wanted Malaysians to hang about with their heads bowed. The quiet precision with which the passing of the baton was orchestrated left the enormous goodwill accruing to Dr Mahathir and Abdullah with nowhere else to go but into the people's hearts.

Even the Opposition parties have mumbled their welcome. It will not be easy for them to recover from the withdrawal symptoms of a two-decade long habit of vilification. For many of their leaders, Dr Mahathir has been a consuming obsession.

Some people suffer more from the loss of a nemesis than the demise of a

loved one. Hell would have frozen over before the Opposition could try to sound nice about the Government, but that's Abdullah for you. He disarms opponents. He is renowned as a consensus-builder who can take criticism. His instinct is to be patient and conciliatory and his first slogan was to "work with me, not for me".

Abdullah chose Parliament for his first official speech on Monday to affirm his position within the matrix of Malaysian democracy. It was an obeisance to an institution that has latterly been known more for its truculent MPs and churlish debates than for being the supreme repository of power.

Nevertheless, it was a signature gesture and an appeal for Parliament itself to shape up to a new administration. To drive home the point, the address was not a roundhouse policy manifesto but a gentle statement of intent.

"I am aware that I will be assessed by the members of this House, by the people and, above all, by the Almighty Allah. The position and power that have been entrusted to me is a test from God for this humble servant. If this can be carried out with integrity, honesty and fairness, then this humble servant will have succeeded in passing the test. But failure to do so will be a heavy burden for me to bear in this world and the next," he said.

Thanks to the lengthy transition and our newspapers, the people have been given a thorough introduction to Pak Lah. Thousands greeted him at Bayan Lepas airport and elsewhere on Saturday as if to welcome a prodigal son.

I do not exaggerate, for the State of Penang was once not considered big or Malay or nationalist enough to ever produce an Umno president and Prime Minister. Abdullah got the job because of what he is, not where he hails from.

Breaking Umno's parochial tendencies and centralising the party's organisation and political talent was one of the many paradigm shifts engineered by Dr Mahathir. Abdullah inherits a movement that is less riven by regional loyalties, more stable in its hierarchy and less servile to patronage and politicking.

Umno, much more than the other component parties in the Barisan Nasional, is unique in its special emphasis on a strong No 2. Perhaps it is only due to a historical recognition that the leadership of the party and country exceeds the abilities of any one person.

Certainly, it is rooted in the Umno idea of a power-sharing partnership that extends to the governance of the nation as a whole. Abdullah recognises this as keenly as his predecessors. He will not make the wrong choice.

Every commentator, qualified or otherwise, has wondered how Abdullah will compare with Dr Mahathir. The cliched question in the international media was whether he would fit into his ex-boss's outsized shoes. But instead of waiting for Abdullah to step out of his considerable shadow, Dr Mahathir graciously took that shadow with him to vacation in Spain. Indeed, the contrasts between the two have proved useful in signifying the close of an era and the beginning of another.

In his nearly 23 years, the country's longest-serving prime minister has become an icon. Unlike Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew, who swore to rise from his grave if his countrymen were so bold as to mess with his legacy after he stepped down, Dr Mahathir's imprint on the nation is simply too deep to be erased. There ought therefore to be no speculation on Abdullah labouring to become his own man. He already is.

All the portents above point to a happy conclusion: if a general election were to be held now, Abdullah would lead the BN to a certain

victory. He is riding a wave of popularity that has not yet crested. Political parties and their voters aren't worth their ballot papers if they can't sniff a winner. The signs so far show clearly that they have found one in Pak Lah.

I end as I began, in asserting that Islam and modernisation are not inconsistent.

Pak Lah is a testimony of the two, an enlightened Malay. That is what Malaysians want him to always be. The fear of an unyielding political Islam as espoused by Pas has rallied the non-Bumiputera behind the ruling coalition.

With a bit of imagination and boldness, Pak Lah ought to eventually - the time is short actually - recover what was lost in the last general election. The usual blandishments, I'm afraid, aren't going to work. Umno needs more than that to continue to prosper and flourish.