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Cabinet pays tribute to Dr M (HL)

Firdaus Abdullah

PUTRAJAYA, Wed. - The Cabinet today paid tribute to Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad for his invaluable service to the nation as Prime Minister for the last 22 years.

Led by Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, Cabinet members expressed gratitude to Dr Mahathir for his guidance, achievements and vision which have successfully transformed Malaysia into a force to be reckoned with.

Abdullah assured Dr Mahathir that his vision and objectives, which had been set out through the various policies, would be continued.

Defence Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak said Dr Mahathir thanked the ministers for their cooperation during his tenure as Prime Minister and urged them to extend the same to his successor.

He said Dr Mahathir was thankful that he received the utmost support from his Cabinet, adding that the Cabinet had worked well as a unit.

"The Prime Minister hopes that it will be the same when Datuk Seri Abdullah takes over.

"He wants us to continue to work for the nation," Najib said, adding that Dr Mahathir emphasised that he had enjoyed chairing all the 883 Cabinet meetings since becoming Prime Minister in 1981.

Youth and Sports Minister Datuk Hishammuddin Hussein said the ministers agreed to continue with the policies and plans Dr Mahathir had put in place.

Holding back tears, Hishammuddin, who is also Umno Youth leader, said Dr Mahathir once again showed his impeccable confidence and strength by chairing his last Cabinet meeting in the usual manner, without showing any emotions.

"As a young leader, I learnt a lot from him, you cannot mix emotions with the responsibility of governing ...this was the last Cabinet meeting (for Dr Mahathir), but it was business as usual," he said.

The Cabinet meeting today began with a group photography session at the Prime Minister's Department, and continued until about 12.30pm.

When the meeting was adjourned, reporters were allowed into the Cabinet meeting room for the first time to capture the last moments of Dr Mahathir as a Cabinet member and chairman.

Dr Mahathir then signed the minutes of the meeting for the last time and thanked each and every one of the Cabinet members for their support.

As the Prime Minister made his way out of the "most important room in the government" for the last time, senior Cabinet members who have served alongside Dr Mahathir could not contain their emotions and cried openly.

Works Minister Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu, International Trade and Industry Minister Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz, Culture, Arts and Tourism Minister Datuk Paduka Kadir Sheikh Fadzir and several others were in tears when Dr Mahathir once again shook their hands and thanked them.

For MCA president Datuk Seri Ong Ka Ting, the Cabinet meeting today is one which he would never forget.

"Almost all of us could not hold back our tears, some cried openly ...our sentiments, our love for Dr Mahathir ...it was tough and very emotional.

"Dr Mahathir has so far chaired more than 800 Cabinet meetings ...so it is very hard for us to accept the fact that he's leaving," Ong, who is Housing and Local Government Minister, told the media, while trying to

control his already flowing tears.

Samy Vellu said Dr Mahathir was a dedicated leader with farsightedness.

"The country had prospered by leaps and bounds under him. He has put Malaysia on the world map and earned respect from many world leaders.

"With his great leadership qualities he has managed to maintain harmony in a country which has people of different races.

"The Cabinet members felt sad and many of them found it difficult to control their feelings. We expressed our gratitude and appreciation to him after the Cabinet meeting," he said.

Science, Technology and Environment Minister Datuk Seri Law Hieng Ding said he would miss being at Cabinet meetings chaired by Dr Mahathir.

"His meetings are never dull, too serious or business-like, as he has a sense of humour and can be light-hearted. He is a good listener," he said.

Law, who is also Sarawak United People's Party deputy chairman, said Dr Mahathir was very meticulous in chairing the meetings, and was a good listener who showed equal concern for each ministry.

"My ministry will continue to work hard under (Datuk Seri) Abdullah (Ahmad Badawi)'s leadership ...this is probably the best way we can pay Dr Mahathir back for his sacrifices."

Education Minister Tan Sri Musa Mohamad said Dr Mahathir's retirement was a big loss to the country's education system as the Prime Minister had contributed a lot of ideas to improve the system.

"He has made immense contributions to the education system. The most touching is his idea to teach Mathematics and Science in English," he said.

Second Finance Minister Datuk Dr Jamaludin Jarjis said the country was indebted to Dr Mahathir for two reasons.

First, Dr Mahathir had succeeded in transforming the country's economy from that based on agriculture to one based on manufacturing and industries, and second in rescuing the country from the financial crisis of 1997-98 by using his own financial rescue model.

Jamaludin said the world, including the International Monetary Fund, had acknowledged Dr Mahathir's method as the best formula to bring the country out of the crisis which had hit the whole of Asia.

Dr Mahathir said his parting advice for his Cabinet colleagues was for them to render full co-operation and support to Abdullah.

"To give Pak Lah every support the way they supported me, the way they worked with me ...I hope they will work with the new leadership so that we can progress.

"It was a bit sad and I said goodbye to all of them, and as it is the last one which I chaired so I think it's very significant for me and also significant for others who have been working with me."

Asked if he would miss taking out his much-feared notebook during Cabinet meetings, Dr Mahathir, who was all smiles, said: "I think it's a custom that has been passed on to others. So they all have their own notebooks now and I'm quite sure it'll be useful for them."