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Continuing the Mahathir legacy

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ONE OF the most significant hints of what the post-Mahathir era would look like came from none other than his anointed successor, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

Speaking to a group of foreign and local investment bankers and fund managers in Putrajaya on Jan 21, he said Malaysia would continue the path charted by the Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, for achieving the goals of Vision 2020.

Abdullah said: 'It is a national policy, agreed to collectively by the Cabinet and will remain the primary driver for Malaysian Government policies.'

Besides perhaps Tun Abdul Ghafar Baba, Abdullah is one deputy whom Dr Mahathir can count on to continue much of his policies. The same cannot be said of Tan Sri Musa Hitam and Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim had they succeeded him.

Those who know Abdullah well have no difficulty in understanding and believing his pledge. As he himself has said, it would be shortsighted and counter-productive to introduce new policies merely to stamp his name on them.

Another statement to tie Abdullah down to his pledge is his acknowledgement that having spent 38 years in public service as a civil servant and politician, experience told him that good strategies should not be cheaply discarded.

In the past 21 years, Dr Mahathir has not only developed a host of unorthodox policies - anything from the 'Look East' policy of 1981 to the currency controls of 1998 - but has proven that with good strategies and commitment they could be successfully implemented.

What Abdullah and his future team can and should do is to adapt these policies to the changing domestic and international environment.

Admittedly, there are policies and programmes of Dr Mahathir which are fighting an uphill battle, not so much because they are flawed but because of the changing global environment.

While it is presumptuous for this writer to claim to know Abdullah intimately, the years of reporting his activities and engaging him in private discussion suggest that the man is capable of making sound decisions.

He needs to be as good a listener as Dr Mahathir while at the same time assembling his own team of advisers in such major areas as politics, economy, business, education and religion.

Dr Mahathir is legendary in his ability to put up with lengthy speeches and presentations, and to digest mountains of information quickly. Of course, some will argue that he listens to only a few key advisers.

Abdullah has to be an equally good listener, more so now when a whole new generation of Malaysians - the so-called New Economic Policy generation - is demanding accountability and transparency.

A man of character

While Abdullah may choose to listen to more people, he can enhance the effectiveness of his information gathering and decision-making processes by having a time-driven private office.

In simple language, time must be strictly managed, visitors must not be made to wait and gatecrashers should be barred.

Abdullah is a team player. I am impressed with his demeanour and

candour, which he amply displayed during the years when he was in political wilderness after backing the unsuccessful attempt by the Tengku Razaleigh-Musa team to unseat Dr Mahathir in 1987.

While most members of the team withdrew from active politics or joined Tengku Razaleigh in forming the now defunct Parti Melayu Semangat 46, Abdullah remained staunchly Umno and accepted Dr Mahathir's leadership. It is not in Abdullah's character to self-indulge.

But taking over from a hugely successful leader like Dr Mahathir is not going to be easy. But there is a plus side. He is taking over a recovering economy. Only a war in Iraq can sabotage the process not only for Malaysia but also the rest of the world.

As much as Dr Mahathir had to prove to the non-Malays that he was not the 'ultra' that he was portrayed to be when he became Prime Minister in 1981, Abdullah has to prove that he is not the 'Mr Nice Guy' who can be taken advantage of.

Politically, his biggest task is to decide whether to keep the old guard or build a new line-up as Dr Mahathir did in the early years of his stewardship. What is obvious is that Umno and the Barisan Nasional (BN) need regeneration.

The old guard can make life easier for him and for themselves by volunteering to resign, as a few have already declared openly. They must themselves decide if they have over-stayed the welcome.

PAS will certainly try to find fault with Abdullah as it had done with Dr Mahathir and his predecessors. Abdullah should be able to take PAS head on. He is an Islamic scholar. He reads and understands the Arabic version of the Quran.

And what an average PAS leader will find most troubling is the fact that he can lead a congregation as an imam.

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THE GOOD DOCTOR HIMSELF

IT is often said that the only thing constant in life is change. To be philosophical about it, we can say that change is as inevitable as death itself.

Life in Malaysia has changed so much and so fast in recent decades that we have literally lost track of time.

This brings to mind a recent debate in the newspapers regarding doctors who are refusing to make house calls. This doesn't apply to every doctor of course, but we can safely assume that the majority are not very keen to do so.

Yet, only four or five decades ago house calls were an essential part of modern medicine. Those were the days when doctors were few in numbers, transportation difficult and the sick were more likely to seek the help of the bomoh, dukun and sinseh.

Doctors, especially those in the fledgling private practice, were only too happy to make house calls not just to make a few ringgit but to spread the gospel of modern medicine.

In any case, when a doctor was summoned, the patient was either too ill to travel or there was just no way that he or she could be transported out of a remote village.

In Kedah, one such doctor was Mahathir Mohamad, the co-owner of Maha Clinic in Alor Star. Being among the first few Malay private medical practitioners in town, he was often summoned to remote villages to treat the sick after the bomoh and dukun had failed to drive away the evil spirits residing in the patients.

It was through these house calls that Dr Mahathir became known as a compassionate doktor prevet (private doctor). Very often, he made no demands for payment and at other times his patients were too poor to pay.

When he contested his first general election as the Alliance (forerunner

to the BN) in 1964 in Kota Star Selatan (now Pendang), his medical practice and his community service became the winning formula.

In the subsequent general election (1969), he was dubbed `Dr Umno' by his PAS rival. PAS supporters were warned not to visit his clinic because he would give them lethal injections. He lost that election.

Today's doctors, in particular those in private practice, are the beneficiaries of the likes of Dr Mahathir, who served selflessly staying true to the profession's Hippocratic Oath.