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Just reward for `Mr Nice Guyy`

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HE'S finished, they said. Don't waste time on him. One newspaper reporter even referred to him as a political has-been.

To show their contempt for the fallen man, many refused to greet him. For some, the fear of being tainted by association was reason enough to avoid him. One man was seen dashing behind a pillar to get away from him.

The opprobrium was astonishing for someone with no obvious enemies. After all, he was, and still is, "Mr Nice Guy".

But the very day it was announced that Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi was being relieved of his post as Defence Minister on May 7, 1987, the walls came up instantly.

No one wanted to be linked to a loser.

Indeed, when Abdullah was thrown out into the cold between 1987 and 1991 for casting his lot with Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah and Tan Sri Musa Hitam to challenge Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's leadership, it seemed as if he would never return to the Cabinet, let alone occupy the top post.

Unfortunately, for those who shunned him during those 46 months when he was removed from the Cabinet, Abdullah is today Malaysia's fifth Prime Minister.

Although none of the individuals have shown remorse, the months in "Siberia" were instructive for many reasons.

Most importantly, this was when he discovered his true friends.

To while away the time, he picked up golf. It was also during this period that he travelled around the country to meet Umno members. Although he was not always welcomed, he pressed on regardless.

His sister-in-law Noor Asiah, who manages a travel agency, gave him two rooms in the Pernas headquarters in Jalan Raja Laut, Kuala Lumpur where he set up office with the help of the late Datuk Fatah Abdullah, his former political secretary.

This was where friends and Umno members from his constituency met him.

It was around this time that Abdullah was often seen lunching at Santa's Capati House, a worn-out plasterboard shop which seduces customers with its mouth-watering aroma, just behind Jalan Tuanku Abdul Rahman.

This was one of Abdullah's favourite shops. It was also the most convenient and closest to his office.

But because there was no air-conditioning, one or two of his friends would go down first to order the food. When the capati was ready, they would call him.

The heat is so oppressive that no one, it seems, can last more than 30 minutes in the shop. Everyone, including Abdullah, would eat quickly when the food was laid on the table.

Dave, a burly Sikh who owns Santa's, recalls the days when the shop was full and the future Prime Minister had to wait his turn for a table, "like any ordinary customer".

A pleasant and simple man, he said of Abdullah. "He always greeted me and sometimes he would invite me to sit with him."

"That was his sabbatical period," said Datuk Mohamed Abid, a close friend of Abdullah and one of few who waded through the rough waters with him.

No stranger to Umno's history, Mohamed Abid recently published a book titled Reflections of Pre-Independence Malaya.

Although Mohamed Abid is reluctant to reveal details of his discussions

with Abdullah during the 46 months, he does describe in broad-brush a man who perseveres and believes completely in takdir, or fate.

He should know. He and his wife Datin Marina Anwar were among a clutch of friends who rallied around Abdullah and his wife Datin Seri Endon Mahmood during that difficult period.

Both couples have grown so close they regard each other's children as their own. When Mohamed Abid's daughter Datin Mastisa married Datuk Mokhzani, who is Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's son, Abdullah spoke at the wedding on behalf of the family.

Since the late 80s, the two families have also established a tradition of spending a few weeks every December in London to celebrate the birthday of Endon and Noraini her late twin who died earlier this year.

Now that Abdullah is Prime Minister, Mohamed Abid said it is unlikely that they will be able to do this.

"But he is a man of his word," says the loyal friend. Last year, despite Abdullah's punishing schedule as Deputy Prime Minister, the two families still managed a short break together.

"In all the time I've known him (since 1977), I have never heard him utter a mean word about anyone. He harbours no ill-feelings towards anyone. His patience is his strength."

Once, just before the 1990 Umno election, Abdullah, perhaps in a moment of uncertainty, said to Mohamed Abid: "If I fail this time, shall we go into business?"

Mohamed Abid said he laughed. "Just concentrate on politics," he told Abdullah, "you know nothing about business".

The strategy employed by his supporters who worked around the clock before the day of the election was effective: Abdullah was returned as vice-president. A clear factor which led to his victory, it is said, was sympathy.

Unlike other "renegades", he had not left Umno. He was also steadfast in his support of the president - a fact which members obviously noted and appreciated.

But it was only in 1991 that he came back into the Cabinet as Foreign Minister. Even then, he was kept at arm's length.

This time, two new obstacles stood before him: the Wawasan Team and former Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, whom everyone was eager to please.

Yet, Abdullah - in his unassuming and unhurried way - survived.

"It's hard to bring down someone like him," says a political observer. "He doesn't seem to have skeletons, scandals or salacious secrets."

Mohamed Abid agreed. At the close of the 1990 general election, he followed Abdullah as he went to cast his vote in Kepala Batas. Before they reached the Barisan Nasional booth, Abdullah stopped to give salams to people at a Pas booth.

As they left, Mohamed Abid heard one of those manning the booth grumbling: "Hai, kalau macam ini, kalah lah kita hari ini." (If things are going to be like this, we'll lose today.)

Perhaps this is the key to his survival: even before the call for battle, he disarms his enemies gently.