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Pak Lah is PM (HL)

KUALA LUMPUR, Fri. - The nation stood still today as it witnessed a smooth transfer of power from Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad to Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi as the country's fifth Prime Minister amidst sombre and moving ceremonies at Istana Negara and Putrajaya.

Abdullah, fondly and popularly known as Pak Lah, was sworn in before Yang di-Pertuan Agong Tuanku Syed Sirajuddin after Friday prayers, a ceremony which was immediately followed by the conferment of the Anugerah Darjah Kebesaran Persekutuan Seri Maharaja Mangku Negara (SMN) on Dr Mahathir from the King which carries the title "Tun".

Abdullah, 64, took his oath of office and oath of secrecy before the King and then signed the instrument of office before Chief Justice Tan Sri Ahmad Fairuz Sheikh Abdul Halim.

Chief Secretary to the Government Tan Sri Samsudin Osman acted as witness.

Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali was conferred the Seri Setia Mahkota Malaysia (SSM) award which also carries the title of "Tun".

Raja Permaisuri Agong Tuanku Fauziah and Abdullah's wife Datuk Seri Endon Mahmood attended the ceremony.

Also in the Balairong Seri were Cabinet Ministers, Menteri Besar, Dewan Negara president Tan Sri Dr Abdul Hamid Pawanteh, Dewan Rakyat Speaker Tun Dr Mohamed Zahir Ismail, Chief Judge of Malaya Tan Sri Haidar Mohamed Noor, Chief Judge of Sabah and Sarawak Tan Sri Steve Shim Lip Kiong, Attorney-General Tan Sri Abdul Gani Patail, Armed Forces chief Jen Tan Sri Zahidi Zainuddin, Inspector-General of Police Tan Sri Norian Mai, secretaries-general of the various ministries and heads of department.

Family members of Dr Mahathir and Pak Lah were also present.

After the ceremony at Istana Negara which was shown live on television, Dr Mahathir and Pak Lah headed for the Prime Minister's Department in Putrajaya where thousands had gathered to bid farewell to the former and welcome the latter.

Dr Mahathir arrived first and proceeded to the Prime Minister's office on level five where he signed a few documents.

Pak Lah arrived a few minutes later and the two shook hands for the cameras before Dr Mahathir handed over the Prime Minister's office to the former.

The two then had a meeting while hordes of people, mostly from the Prime Minister's Department and wellwishers, gathered on level one to wait for them to leave for their respective homes.

After the private discussion, Dr Mahathir headed to the clockin machine, a system he introduced after becoming the fourth Prime Minister, and smilingly punched out at 5.06pm, ending his over 22 years in office.

Acknowledging the massive crowd, Dr Mahathir and his wife, accompanied by the new Prime Minister, were visibly touched by the turnout.

Dr Mahathir and Dr Siti Hasmah took more than half an hour to reach his waiting car while he shook hands with as many of them as he could.

Chanting "Hidup Mahathir!", the sight of Dr Mahathir waving goodbye moved many to tears. Many also gave mementos to Dr Mahathir, who was visibly touched by the turnout. Office workers mobbed the couple all the way to his waiting car and only the patient but firm handling of his bodyguards prevented them from being crushed.

Dr Mahathir took over the country's helm from Tun Hussein Onn on July

16, 1981. He first announced his desire to step down from his post at the annual Umno general assembly last year.

Pak Lah joined government service in 1964 as assistant secretary in the Public Service Department before entering politics. His rise up the political ladder has not been smooth, as did Dr Mahathir. Abdullah, one of three Umno vice-presidents, was made Deputy Prime Minister on Jan 8, 1999. He married Endon on Sept 4, 1965, and they have a son, Kamaluddin, and a daughter, Nori, and four grandchildren.

He also served as Foreign Minister (1991-1999), Defence Minister (1986-1987) and Education Minister (1984). Tomorrow, Pak Lah is scheduled to visit his mother, Datuk Khailan Hassan, in Kepala Batas. A huge crowd is expected to welcome him at Penang airport.