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Pak Lah's made of sterner stuff

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THE bus story has been going around for some time now.

It begins with the driver - Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. In the initial part of the route, it was just him with perhaps one or two passengers.

No one else wanted to get on, especially when he was removed from the Cabinet in early 1987.

His bus spluttered and chugged along while other executive coaches zoomed past.

When Abdullah was brought back into the Government and made Foreign Minister in 1991, he acquired a handful of passengers.

Now that he is Malaysia's fifth Prime Minister, there is only standing room with many more waiting at the bus stops.

The question now is: who will be let on and who will be asked to leave?

This, observers say, will be Abdullah's first test - will he make the right choice and still retain his "Mr Nice Guy" image?

Already critics are saying he is too conciliatory to choose well. But there are those who insist that behind his disarming smile, Abdullah has a few tricks up his sleeve.

The fact is, they say, he is still driving the bus. If nothing else, this is an indication of his endurance.

A close associate who recognises and admires Abdullah's tenacity is former Deputy Prime Minister Tan Sri Musa Hitam.

He said when Abdullah was removed as Defence Minister in 1987, no one thought he would ever make a comeback.

But he surprised everyone by doing it on his own.

"He had no backers, no patron, nothing. Just guts. When the Umno elections came, he nominated himself for vice-president and won," said Musa.

"His organisational machine was nothing compared with those of the big guns. They had money, resources, support.

"He had nothing but his name and reputation. But his 'Mr Clean' image carried him very far."

Musa added that now that Abdullah has arrived, it would not be easy for him to sustain this super-clean reputation. Not that he is likely to change; rather, others may use his name for their personal benefit.

Even if they don't, and even if his close friends and relatives do well, people will still link their achievements to him.

Some may use his name without his knowledge, said Musa. This is the price all top leaders have to pay. Again, how he manages this will be yet another challenge.

Abdullah will also have to bear the weight of public scrutiny where even the smallest of blemishes will be greatly magnified.

This is inevitable after 23 years of Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's inimitable leadership.

If Dr Mahathir had been blunt, bold and brusque; Abdullah, in countless instances, is said to be too soft-spoken and tactful. He lacks the killer instinct, many say.

In the mean-spirited quarters of the foreign media, he is welcomed only because they are tired of Dr Mahathir's strident, abrasive manner.

All this adds to the misperception about the new Prime Minister.

The comparisons, some observers say, are exaggerated and unfair.

Look at the way he handled the 46 months in the cold, his unflinching loyalty to Umno and his complete devotion to family and friends. All these point to a man with the strength of character needed to shoulder great responsibilities.

Certainly he is not prone to panic, said Musa.

When Dr Mahathir announced his resignation at last year's Umno general assembly, everybody reacted emotionally while Abdullah remained cool.

"I was impressed with how he dealt with it in the backroom. He calmed the people and soon after came out with a statement. That is Abdullah."

That same night, said a close associate, Abdullah had a meeting with aides. His prime concern was that Dr Mahathir should stay and be accorded proper respect for his contributions to the country.

"He was thinking of how to keep the PM, not about his taking over," said an associate.

Observers also credit the man for his diplomacy over the "naming-of-the-DPM" incident. He did not play to the gallery.

However, if people think Abdullah is nice and meek, they are in for a surprise, said a political analyst. He may appear too calm, but he is self-directed.

Judging by his track record, Abdullah is not likely to be a one-man show. Observers said he will need feedback and support from the civil service, which should not be a problem because he started his career there and is comfortable with civil servants.

It helps that he is a good listener because he will have to pay particular attention to the newly-created middle class of Malaysians who are apolitical, discerning and potential swing voters.

"With these people you cannot use emotional blackmail anymore. You have to employ logic to appeal to them," said Musa.

In handling the economy, Abdullah should take on the role of chairman of the board, observers said. He just needs to get the right people to produce the results he wants.

Abdullah will probably sail through his first term as it is customary to give newcomers a wide berth in the first few years. After that, the due process of politics will take place and all leaders must accept this.

Former prime ministers - Tun Hussein Onn and Dr Mahathir - had their share of detractors when they assumed the top post. For different reasons, there were considerable doubts that they would be able leaders. Of course, history has shown that both men contributed considerably to the growth and development of the country.

Now, it is Abdullah's turn and although there are the usual doubts, he is more than likely to manage well, say friends and associates.

His personal strengths, they add, will see him through.

For instance, he believes wholeheartedly in a multiracial Malaysia. That he and his wife Datin Seri Endon Mahmood have so many close friends from all ethnic backgrounds is a testimony to his vision for the nation.

He appears to have few material needs. To this day, friends say, he does not have a house in his name. His last house in Bangsar was sold some years ago to help fund his political work. Since then, the family has been living in Government quarters.

At the last Umno General Assembly, someone noticed three holes on the sole of his shoe, of which he was blithely unaware.

If not for his children - Kamal and Nori - who buy him his clothes, Abdullah is said to be singularly happy wearing shirts he picks up in factory outlets.

He is also accessible. When he met students at a function in his office recently, he sought their ideas on what they felt he should do, as the fifth prime minister of the country.

"Call me Pak Lah," he said, "and send me your wish list." Endon's health is clearly at the very top of his own wish list.

Soon after the Pendang by-elections on July 18 last year, in which BN won by a slim majority, he opened a conference on Islam organised by his office which brought progressive thinkers to Malaysia.

As he mingled with the participants, reporters asked whether he was pleased that Endon was coming back from the United States. She had been away many months for breast cancer treatment.

Abdullah, who grinned from ear to ear, said: "Happy? It's better than the Pendang results!"