

## **Pak Lah book will reignite embers of feud with Dr M**

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COMMENT A little over four years after he left office, a book has been compiled on Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's years as prime minister.

NONE From the advance publicity, the book 'Awakening, the Abdullah Badawi Years in Malaysia' is set to become the talk of the town when it is released later this month.

By dwelling on his rocky relationship with his predecessor Dr Mahathir Mohamad in the advance publicity prior to the book's launch, Abdullah has made sure the publication will gain maximum publicity and that sales will be brisk.

From the tenor of Abdullah's pre-publication remarks about Mahathir, 'Awakening' is set to be a bestseller; anything critical of Mahathir is certain to be lapped up with avidity by the public.

This is because the man revels in controversy and leaves both critics and admirers struggling for nuanced judgment. One either likes Mahathir or abhors him.

Probably, there are an equal number of people who admire Mahathir as abominate him. Both sides would be interested in Abdullah's take on a man who chose Abdullah to be his successor only to quickly repudiate him as misfit.

The first prime minister of the country, Tunku Abdul Rahman, came to rue his favoring of Abdul Razak Hussein as his successor.

tunku abdul rahman 290809 But that regret, expressed to visitors to the Tunku (right) when the latter was in retirement in Penang and near the end of his life (he died in December 1990), coalesced only in retrospect rather than when Razak, who died in January 1976, was in the saddle as PM from September 1970.

Malaysia's third PM, Hussein Onn (1976-1981), also came to regret his choice of Mahathir as his successor but, in accordance with the norms of Malay political culture, was discreet about his disapproval; only a few were privy to Hussein's remorse.

Slow to choose No 2

Mahathir, no respecter of cultural norms, wasted little time in going public with his quickly acquired distaste for Abdullah.

The latter was not so much the obvious choice of Mahathir to succeed him as a selection that was deemed to be the most acceptable at the time it was made in January 1999.

Incumbent president Mahathir was inclined to wait for Umno's triennial elections in 1999 to decide who should be the party's No 2 after he had sacked Anwar Ibrahim, the deputy prime minister and deputy president of Umno, from both party and government in late August-early September of 1998.

The sacking caused a major upheaval in Malaysia politics with consequences that reverberate to this day.

NONEAfter Anwar's (right) sacking, humiliation and arraignment on corruption and sodomy charges, the No 2 post in Umno and in government was left vacant from early September 1998 to the third week of January 1999.

This vacancy had senior members of the party's supreme council worried that if anything should happen to Mahathir, who was 73-years-old then, a mad scramble for the No. 2 post would occur.

Given the political tremors occasioned by the sacking of Anwar, the seniors pressed a reluctant Mahathir to choose a No 2 to forestall a repeat of the instability that followed Anwar's extirpation from party and government.

Mahathir's procrastination had the effect of stirring speculation that perhaps he did not think that there was anyone in the upper echelons of the supreme council especially fitted to succeed him.

It must be remembered than in sacking Anwar, Mahathir had run through three deputies; all thee wound up as discards.

Must be 'fate'

Senior Umno supreme council members were perturbed at speculation that perhaps Mahathir was looking beyond the confines of the council, having wearied of finding a suitable successor from within.

NONEThe ever-aspiring Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah just then decided to host a breaking of the fast (it was Ramadan in January 1999) function at his house in a

plush district of Kuala Lumpur.

Mahathir (left) and anyone who was someone in the supreme council were invited.

When there was a no-show by more than half of those invited, it was taken as a clear sign that most of the supreme council wanted Mahathir to choose a No 2 from within their set rather than outside of it.

Mahathir kept putting the choice off until an attack of pleurisy he suffered in January made the implorations of the senior Umno supreme council members that a No 2 be announced irresistible.

At the end of a supreme council meeting in the third week of January, Mahathir announced quietly – almost anti-climactically – that Abdullah was the choice as acting deputy president of the party and deputy prime minister.

“Takdir” (fate), sighed the modest Abdullah when he received the news.

But it was a fate that turned out to have its own crown of thorns.

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