

Judges had more 'scrotal gumption' under Pak Lah

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By Nigel Aw

Despite the many criticisms against Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's tenure as prime minister, former Court of Appeal judge Mahadev Shankar said one bright spot of his administration was that the judiciary was in better shape.

Mahadev said that the impact was immediate, as Anwar Ibrahim was acquitted of sodomy charges soon after Abdullah came to power.

"Within the judiciary itself, there was a change. Sure there was a change and I am referring here to the acquittal of Anwar Ibrahim in the Federal Court.

"At that time, you will see the two male judges on the panel had the scrotal gumption to do the justice that the law required them to do," he said during the book launch of 'Awakening: The Abdullah Badawi Years in Malaysia' in Kuala Lumpur.

The Federal Court had overturned Anwar's sodomy conviction on Sep 2, 2004, slightly over 10 months since Abdullah took over from Dr Mahathir Mohamad as prime minister.

Prior to that, Mahadev, who was on the royal commission of inquiry into judicial fixing that was also set up under Abdullah's tenure, said who the judges "worked for" was up to other minds to explore.

Liberating the judges

But under Abdullah he said the former premier's slogan of "don't work for me but work with me" had resonated with the judges.

"(What) Pak Lah did in the judicial field was to liberate the mind of judges.

"To get to grips with what they had to do was the message he said to them: 'don't do anything to please me, just fulfill your judicial oath and that is enough for me'," he recollected.

These words, Mahadev said, got through to many judges to responded to Abdullah's call.

Furthermore, Mahadev said while people may look at Abdullah's administration with disappointment in hindsight, they must ask themselves what did they do when the former premier asked the rakyat to work with him.

He described Abdullah as a prime minister the country needed at that at that point of time. "We needed him to allow the green shoots to grow," he said.

Abdullah had succeeded strongman Dr Mahathir Mohamad who had been premier for 22 years and later turned against his successor and contributed to his early exit in 2009.

The other 'Maha'

Mahadev noted Malaysia Day today also coincided with the Onum celebration by the Malayali people from Kerala.

In a tongue in cheek remark aimed at Mahathir, Mahadev explained that the name "Maha" was common for those from Kerala, but said his name shouldn't be confused with others who has similar sounding name but shared the same heritage.

At a forum later, editors of the book claimed that their title wasn't a mischievous reference to the former premier's tendency to doze off.

Instead, co-editor James Chin said that the title was fitting as many Malaysians were awakened in the Abdullah years and there was even a sprouting of news portals under his tenure.

Echoing this, the other co-editor Bridget Welsh said: "His (Abdullah's) weakness and unintended consequences made Malaysia stronger - there was a dissipation of fear among Malaysians.

"Malaysians became more critical in how they think about issues and were more analytical. That is part of his legacy," she said.

However, while Abdullah moves out of the frame, Bridget said that the country will likely see continued polarisation as Mahathir's influence lingers and drives the polarising forces.

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