

## **The Abdullah recrudescence**

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COMMENT An upswing in the hitherto low ratings of the premiership of Abdullah Ahmad Badawi seems to be taking place.

The stock of Malaysia's fifth prime minister was low when he was compelled to give up office in April 2009 in the face of electoral shocks to Umno-BN in Election 2008.

It was a vertiginous fall, after a mere 48 months, from the results of Election 2004 when Abdullah, cresting on the wave of national expectations of political reform and institutional revival after 22 years of the Dr Mahathir Mohamad imperium, led his coalition to an impressive 64 percent take of the popular vote.

abdullah ahmad badawi pm pc 160908 01Four years later, as a result of his backpedaling on critical areas, like reform of the police force and the fight against graft, Abdullah saw his popularity nosedive from its heady electoral perch of 2004 to the doldrums of Election 2008.

A year on from that stinging setback - months spent in a forlorn bid to stave off the inevitable - Abdullah bowed and accepted the end of his season at the top.

Perhaps the only consolation of his retreat was the grace with which he brought it off, it being a mark of statesmanship that a leader yields gracefully what he has no longer the power to withhold.

Now, a little over four years from Abdullah's valedictory graces, there is an uptick in his ratings.

For sure, a leader's ratings on those fairly bogus scales of history can flicker around like a speedometer gone wrong.

This is because not only are leaders judged on what they have done and what they have failed to do there is also the question of the vagaries of history.

The forces that influence the historical standing of leaders - shifts in popular opinion, the emergence of consciousness of some ideal or necessity, demographic changes - operate on levels of complexity one can only perceive, and that too vaguely, some time after they have occurred.

Maintaining a certain restraint

Abetting the Abdullah recrudescence is his relative quiet in comparison with the noisily captious ways of his predecessor.

It's de rigueur for retired leaders to maintain a certain restraint when commenting on current affairs.

It's not that they are debarred from commenting on current goings-on: awareness that vision is always 20/20 in hindsight properly restraints the impulse to hold forth archly on current affairs.

Abdullah has abided by this restraint and only commented when there was a need to or when such comments as he made did not obtrude on the prevailing debates.

The retired Mahathir, by contrast, was an albatross around Abdullah's neck and is a millstone around present Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak's.

awakening the abdullah badawi years in malaysia book 'Awakening', a book of retrospectives and assessments of Abdullah's tenure, published last month, has been well-timed to call attention to moves he made during his tenure - checking fiscal irresponsibility, opening space for dissent, and attempting to restore judicial independence - which stand him in good stead compared to the track record of his predecessor and that of his successor.

Again here, the contrast with the memoirs of Mahathir, 'A Doctor in the House', a tawdry exercise in obfuscation, was stark.

Mahathir is the more prolific writer, having written tracts early in his career and even during his time as premier, but his aims in his memoir were abjectly self-serving. His book deserves the oblivion it quickly attained.

Which brings us to the factor that judicious observers would be apt to cite as the most likely to figure in the revised estimates of the premiership of Abdullah Badawi.

This was his attempt to restore independence to the judiciary, an institution that suffered the debilitation Mahathir visited it through the impeachment of Lord President Salleh Abbas in 1988 and promotion of mediocrities to the bench.

This plus point about Abdullah's tenure was made by no less a judicial luminary than Mahadev Shankar, the retired Court of Appeal judge, who presided at the launch of 'Awakening' in Kuala Lumpur yesterday.

At the launch, Shankar cited the acquittal of Anwar Ibrahim on appeal of the guilty verdict in the first sodomy charge preferred against him in 1999 in validation of his opinion that Abdullah freed the judiciary to do the thing they were appointed to do.

Shankar deployed the inelegant term "scrotal gumption" to describe the decision of judges who sat on the acquitting panel.

It may have taken "scrotal gumption" for the judges to acquit Anwar on the charge which many felt at the time it was levelled - and more so in retrospect - to have been trumped up.

For Abdullah, however, it must have been plain decency that prompted his exercise in judicial restoration.

That exercise is by no means complete but that he commenced it at all is stupendous and explains the man's reviving historical fortunes

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