

COMMENT | In death, Pak Lah stirs old sorrows and nation's reflection

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COMMENT | Today, with a heavy heart, I join the nation in mourning the passing of Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, a prime minister Malaysia was not ready for.

I had the honour, though far too briefly, of serving under his leadership as a minister. His decision to appoint me was both humbling and deeply meaningful.

It was not a political calculation but a principled choice. He believed in the possibility of real reform in the administration of justice in the country, and he believed a maverick, no-nonsense politician in me could do it.

My tenure, however, was short-lived. Not because of any failure on his part, or a lack of will on mine, but because the very forces he was fighting against proved too entrenched and resistant to the winds of change.

The political landscape was not yet ready. Perhaps, the country itself was not yet ready for the scale of reform he had envisioned.

Reforms and the deep state

When I resigned, I carried not only the weight of personal disappointment but a sorrow that I could not fulfil my promise to Abdullah.

His death reopens that wound but also offers a moment of deep reflection. What did he stand for? What did he hope to achieve? And what can we, who were once his comrades-in-arms, do to honour the memory of a man who never gave up on Malaysia, even when Malaysia seemed to give up on him?

This prime minister got the highest mandate in the 2004 general election. No other prime minister has surpassed that. This emboldened him to reform the country, and he started with the police.

A royal commission of inquiry was set up under former chief justice Dzaidin Abdullah, who came up with the recommendations for a Police Oversight Commission to fight corruption and abuse of power.

However, the deep state players were against it. They even told me that BN would not get the police votes if Abdullah pushed through the police reform. The plan was abandoned.

His vision for Malaysia was not just about economic prosperity or superficial

modernisation. It was about reshaping the soul of the nation. He was a truly religious man.

Abdullah dreamed of a Malaysia that was inclusive, where race and religion could no longer be weaponised for political gain. He imagined a country where institutions are strong, leaders are accountable and the rakyat truly have the power.

Ousted from power

Abdullah was pushed out of power because he wanted to drain the swamp and weaken the deep state. However, he was not equipped for battle. He was kind and gentle. Had he been more combative, things could have turned out differently.

He knew the road would be long and filled with obstacles. He also knew that reforms are not a one-off event but a process, a series of difficult, often unpopular decisions that will only bear fruit in the long term. However, he was prepared to begin that process.

He was willing to be misunderstood, to be maligned, even to be betrayed, because he believed in the righteousness of the cause.

Under his administration, however brief, Abdullah attempted what others only paid lip service to. He began to confront systemic corruption.

It was he who propelled the setting up of the MACC. Unfortunately, we are not prepared to make MACC better.

Abdullah opened the doors to civil society. He empowered independent institutions. He sought to free the press and restore integrity to public life.

These were not easy tasks, and many remain unfinished but they were started because of him.

I often think back to the day he called to offer me the ministerial post. There was no fanfare, no flattery. Just a quiet sincerity, a sense of urgency that our administration of justice could be better.

I accepted the offer although he warned me the opposition to my appointment was strong.

But as events unfolded, I realised that reform is not a solo endeavour. It requires a collective will and a national maturity that we, at the time, were still struggling to reach.

My resignation was not an act of retreat but of principle. Still, I carry with me the feeling that I let him down. And that pain is something I continue to wrestle with.

But in mourning him today, I will always remember his legacy.

What marks a great leader?

The mark of a great leader is not in the monuments erected in his memory. Abdullah will always be remembered as a good and decent man. With him, what you see is what you get. He did not indulge in fancy footwork in his politics.

In the coming days, many tributes will flow. Historians will debate his legacy, commentators will dissect his policies. However, for those of us who knew him, who served under him and who believed in the same cause, his legacy is not academic. It is deeply personal.

He was, in the end, a servant of the people. He wanted our economy to be self-sufficient, which means he wanted agriculture to take centre stage.

I remember him telling me we have to give the Malays what they are good at, that they are farmers first and businesspersons later. He was mocked for that.

Abdullah wanted the preaching of Islam to be guided by ethics and philosophy;

hence the promotion of Islam Hadhari.

Again, they opposed and ridiculed him. They said that Islam was Islam, although in their hypocrisy, they painted Islam in the way that suited their politics.

He wanted our judges to be selected based on merit and ability but a half-baked Judicial Appointments Commission was all they gave him.

The most widely used word under his administration was integrity. Abdullah set up institutes of integrity all over the country, but we failed him. We are afraid to practise what we preach.

We owe it to him, not merely to mourn, but to act. Not just to eulogise his principles but to live by them. We must continue to fight for clean governance, for an independent judiciary, for a media free from control, and for a decent political culture that rewards sincerity over drama and cronyism.

Abdullah once told me that real reform does not begin in Parliament or cabinet, but in the conscience of every citizen; that Malaysia will only change when we have a leader who with sincerity can convince Malaysians to demand change, not once every five years at the ballot box, but every day in how we live, speak, and act.

To Abdullah, who dared to hope for a better Malaysia, your dream still flickers.

You may have left us in body, but your spirit, your vision, and your courage will remain. May you rest in peace. Your struggle has stuttered, but one day, things may change.

And may we, the living, be worthy of the future you fought so hard to give us.

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