

Who's worse : Dr Mahathir or Pak Lah?
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Currently there is much heated debate over whether Dr Mahathir Mohamad or Abdullah Ahmad Badawi is more to blame for the various woes that afflict the country. MCPX

Our perspective is that Dr M's misdeeds were sins of "commission" while Pak Lah's were that of "omission". The former caused much institutional damage but the latter failed to fix the mess he inherited although he was given a huge mandate to do so.

abdullah ahmad badawi pak lah bashful Many people recall, perhaps with some fondness, the rapid economic development that occurred during Dr M's time as PM, especially in the early-to mid-1990s. However, the institutional damage which can be traced directly to Dr M far outweighs his many economic accomplishments.

The systematic dismantling of a once fiercely-independent judiciary; the convenient acceptance of rampant corruption within Barisan Nasional in general and Umno in particular; the muzzling of mainstream newspapers, reducing them to little more than unofficial mouthpieces for the government; and the centralization of power in the PM's office. These are but a few examples of what Dr M was directly responsible for, the effects of which are still strongly felt today.

So, while it must be acknowledged that Dr M did some good things, there was simply too much bad thrown in with the good.

Dr M's attacks ring hollow

Granted, Pak Lah had neither had the time and opportunity to inflict further damage on national institutions. Perhaps given time, he could have one day matched Dr M's ability to bend every major institution to his will. To Pak Lah's credit, he didn't try to do so in his first term – it could be argued he didn't do much of anything in his first term – certainly, not in the same manner as Dr M.

But Pak Lah came into office with a message of reform. He was the alternate "Reformasi" candidate who promised to eradicate corruption, to reform the civil service including making the police force more efficient and transparent, and to be an inclusive PM for all Malaysians. He achieved none of that and instead squandered the historic mandate given to him in the 2004 general election.

He allowed ethnic extremism to rear its ugly head within his own party, Umno. He tried to table a watered-down police oversight bill to Parliament. He launched his own version of mega-projects in the form of regional corridors. And, it was business as usual in Umno – meaning patronage and money politics were the order of the day.

mahathir khir toyo kmu forum 010408 05 But as weak and ineffective as Pak Lah has been during these past four years – and still so, in many ways – the recent attacks by Dr M ring hollow once they are taken apart and examined.

While Dr M's stinging barbs are great fodder for bloggers and political pundits, they are examples of hypocrisy at its most audacious. Dr M conveniently forgets that it was he who instituted the quota system for Umno's internal elections and that no one was able to challenge him after Tengku Razaleigh's failed bid in 1988.

Dr M also forgets that the Cabinet was as pliant under his premiership as it is now and that he too was surrounded by yes-men who didn't dare contradict him. That is, after all, the culture of Umno – which he cultivated over two decades as its leader.

No credible suggestions

Even now as he calls for Pak Lah to resign, Dr M does not offer any credible suggestions on how to reform Umno or the BN in the face of the unprecedented losses suffered in the recent polls.

All he has to offer is unreserved, uninhibited, unconstructive criticism – good for media sound bites but useless when it comes to helping the party get out of the morass it's in.

Pak Lah might not last long enough to even make it to the Umno polls in December but he can at the very least be credited for gracefully accepting the will of the voters and not resorting to dirty tactics to "alter" the 2008 election results.

There was no trouble in the streets as many people had feared would emerge if BN were to ever lose its psychologically-critical two-thirds majority in Parliament. Can anyone seriously say with full conviction that this would have been the case if Dr M were the PM?

Those who are cheering on Dr M's assault on Pak Lah – and this includes a couple of the most well-known bloggers in this country – would do well to remember that the good ol' days of Dr M were actually not all that good.

It's not difficult to see where we stand on this debate. As disappointing as Pak Lah has been, Dr M is by far the worse of the two PMs.

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