

**Why doesn't Pak Lah fight back?**  
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Those of us who watched the 1995 film 'The American President' will recall how Michael Douglas, in the lead role, refused to respond to attacks by his political opponent, played by Richard Dreyfuss.  
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Douglas' character felt that he should not have to dignify the accusations of his attacker. However, when his presidency, as well as his family and personal life, were on the line, he abandoned his 'elegant silence' and began to aggressively fight back.

In real life and a little closer to home, we have an embattled prime minister who has opted to remain in 'elegant silence' mode even as his nemesis goes all out to topple him. Yes, we are talking about Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and Dr Mahathir Mohamad, respectively.

mahathir in heart institute ijn 091106 abdullah ahmad badawi pak lahSo far, Abdullah has been contented to rely on proxies such as Najib Razak and other Umno leaders to defend him against Mahathir's relentless attacks. Sure, he's jabbed back occasionally. He recently highlighted some of the repressive things Mahathir did as the prime minister, such as Operasi Lalang. But such counter-punches have been few and far between. They pale in comparison to the body blows and sucker punches that Mahathir has been continuously inflicting upon Abdullah.

It's hard to comprehend why he doesn't just come out swinging. It would not be too difficult for him as the prime minister to ask the Anti-Corruption Agency, which comes under his purview, to investigate the various alleged misdeeds of Mahathir during his 22 years in power. If Abdullah can't remember or is not aware of what those alleged misdeeds are, there are at least 82 members of parliament who would be more than happy to help compile a long laundry list for him.

mahathir khir toyo kmu forum 010408 05If one royal commission of inquiry can cause Mahathir so much discomfort, imagine how distracted the former premier would be if he was the subject of several royal commissions. He'd be so preoccupied with making bare denials and repeating "I don't remember", he simply wouldn't have time to attack Abdullah.

The Lingam tape scandal, which now has some serious momentum behind it, can easily be used as grounds for conducting a much larger investigation into the rot in the judiciary, which would inevitably involve further investigations into Mahathir. Actually, Abdullah doesn't even have to go that extent. All he has to do is make sure that a really serious and thorough investigation is done as per the recommendation of the royal commission report. That would be enough to silence Mahathir.

It seems though that he's more interested in going after Karpal Singh for making an alleged seditious remark than Mahathir for his role in the Lingam scandal. Why is he so reluctant to take the fight to Mahathir?

**Mahathir's shock and awe**

We can disregard the notion that he simply does not want to go after a former PM, out of respect. When that former PM is going after your throat, calling you and your family corrupt, and doing his utmost to topple you, whatever respect you might have for him surely would go out the window. So we don't consider this a plausible explanation.

A more likely reason is that Abdullah is complacent enough to believe that he can withstand any attacks by Mahathir and actually continue as PM for the full term. His confidence might be falsely bolstered by the fact that almost all the top Umno leaders have, so far anyway, stood by him.

He might think that Anwar Ibrahim's tough talk about crossover MPs is just that - tough talk. He might also believe his deputy, Najib Razak, is too timid or has too many skeletons in his closet to challenge him for the top spot in Umno.

In reality, Abdullah's position is the furthest thing from stable. Mahathir's continued attacks against him can only cause greater instability within Umno, which will increase the chances of BN MPs crossing over to Pakatan Rakyat. Even if he is right about Najib, other Umno leaders such as Muhyiddin Yassin or Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah might muster enough support to be able to challenge him in the party polls in December.

Another possibility may be that Abdullah is concerned about the collateral damage that would occur if he engages in a battle royale with Mahathir. It's not difficult to imagine the toll it would take on Umno, various people close to him, and even certain members of his family, once Mahathir decides to really play dirty. We've all seen what a malicious gutter politician he can be by the way he went after Anwar in 1998.

If there's an all out war between the current PM and the former PM, you can count on the latter to practice no restraint whatsoever. Nothing is sacred and no one would be spared. It could very well destroy Umno, and by extension BN, not to mention the individual lives it would ruin in the process. If there is one person who can execute 'shock and awe', it's Mahathir.

That said, as the PM, Abdullah can determine which cases to pursue. He could simply zero in on the ones that implicate Mahathir directly without entangling too many Umno leaders. In other words, minimise the collateral damage. One should never underestimate the powers of incumbency, powers that Mahathir used to great effect when he was the PM.

Mahathir is now openly calling for Umno MPs to abandon the party and become independents. If this isn't the last straw that breaks the camel's back, we can't imagine what could be. Knowing Abdullah, though, he will maintain his elegant silence and in doing so condemn himself to eventual political oblivion.