

Pak Lah : the good and the bad
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It is common practice for commentators and pundits to evaluate the legacy of a major political figure when they step down from office. The legacies of US presidents are an obvious example. More recently, Dr Mahathir Mohamad's 22-year legacy as our prime minister was put under the microscope when he stepped down in 2003.

While Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi is scheduled to step down in March next year, we think that his political legacy has already been cemented. As such, now is a good a time as any to evaluate his term as PM, both the good and the bad.

We do not want to evaluate his legacy in isolation but to compare his record to that of Dr M. Naturally, his predecessor has a much longer track record as PM and during his time, he was more extreme in terms of both the good and bad things he did as compared to Abdullah, who was a much more moderate figure in terms of his actions.

Perhaps the most significant good act to have happened under Abdullah's watch was that Anwar Ibrahim was released from jail in 2004. Even though some may argue that it was the courts which released Anwar (and not Abdullah), it is hard to believe that if Dr M was still in power, Anwar's conviction would have been overturned.

The symbolic act of Abdullah's son-in-law Khairy Jamaluddin going over to Anwar's house to hand him his passport so that Anwar could go overseas for his back operation could possibly have been the high point of Abdullah's supposedly more 'liberal' administration.

Abdullah's record in terms of freeing up the media is very mixed. Even though some, notably those editors who are close to his administration, have argued that press controls were actually loosened, many other editors and journalists would argue otherwise.

According to the Press Freedom Index compiled by Reporters without Borders, Malaysia ranked 122 out of 167 countries in 2004 when Abdullah first took office and was ranked 124 out of 169 countries in 2007.

Dr Mahatdir may not have been so restrained

But where Abdullah does deserve some praise is for not cracking down on the media after the disastrous election results on March 8.

Perhaps this is because he has had other fires to fight post-election but it is hard to imagine Dr M, had he been PM, allowing the media to become more critical after March 8. He may not have been so restrained in using other repressive instruments such as the ISA and the Seditious Act on pro-opposition bloggers. Operasi Lallang II would not be inconceivable.

Also deserving of praise is Abdullah's decision not resort to dirty tactics in the March general elections as well as in the high stakes by-election in Permatang Pauh two months ago. Granted, some aspects of the electoral system such as vote counting at the polling station level, makes outright vote manipulation more difficult.

mahathir pak lah friday shaking hands 050508Still, Abdullah could have resorted to massive vote buying when internal intelligence was showing signs that the opposition would make massive gains, or in the Permatang Pauh by-election to reduce Anwar's margin significantly if not to prevent him from winning altogether.

Perhaps it was not for want of trying but Abdullah could have tried the tactic employed by the BN in Sabah in 1994 which was to buy over opposition state assemblymen. This could have turned the balance of power in the Perak state assembly, where a switch of just two state assembly representatives would have given control of the state back to the BN.

The fourth positive aspect of Abdullah's administration is his decision to cancel certain mega-projects, one of which was the 'crooked' bridge to Singapore. It was a foolish project to begin with, designed with the intent of causing problems for the Singaporean government with little benefit for Malaysians.

While Abdullah did later launch ambitious mega-projects, most notably the Iskandar Development Region (IDR), the amount of government money committed to this project is still uncertain and will probably not likely reach the level spent in the creation of Putrajaya, for example.

Better ties with key trading partners

Finally, Abdullah differentiated himself from Dr M, in a positive way, in terms of his more accommodating foreign policy towards some of our key trading partners including Singapore, Australia, UK and US. After the often times acerbic tone of Malaysia's foreign policy under Dr M, the more moderate and less confrontational style adopted by Abdullah was probably a welcome relief.

It is not clear if Dr M's antics against our so-called 'enemies' abroad actually benefited the average Malaysian citizen. But then again, Abdullah's more accommodating stance may not have resulted in more FDIs or even an FTA with the US, which looks less and less likely with the change in administration on both sides.

At the very least, we did not have the distractions of regular disputes with countries which we do most of our trade and business with in the Abdullah administration.

We have been relatively charitable in our evaluation of the positive aspects or the good achieved by Abdullah. The sad fact is that Abdullah came into power as our fifth prime minister with so much hope and promise. That hope manifested itself in giving Abdullah the largest parliamentary majority in Malaysian political history in 2004. But that hope quickly died with unfulfilled promises and resulted in BN's worst electorate performance in 2008.

We would have liked to add a whole string of additional good points if we could, but Abdullah probably wouldn't be throwing in the towel in March next year. And equally sad is the fact that Abdullah won't be able to implement any reforms of significance before he steps down.