

Pak Lah's last day as PM
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Syed Jaymal Zahiid

"My final advice is for you to work hard. Whatever I have done wrong, please forgive me," were the last words spoken by Abdullah Ahmad Badawi to his staff in the Prime Minister's Department this afternoon.

Abdullah seemed tired when he addressed his staff of about 100, mostly senior officers, at a farewell luncheon held in his honour at Sri Perdana, the prime minister's official residence. He kept his speech sweet and short - four minutes.

The outgoing premier has a heavy schedule today.

His day started with the early morning visit to Istana Negara with his deputy, Najib Abdul Razak. After the farewell luncheon, he visited Mindef for the last time as defence minister.

Today, April 2, is Abdullah's final day as the nation's fifth prime minister. He was in power for five years, six months and two days.

Setbacks behind him

Najib will be sworn in tomorrow as the sixth prime minister - the second from the Razak family to become prime minister. Najib's father, Tun Abdul Razak, was the second prime minister who served from 1971 to 1976.

As for Abdullah, it's understandable if he feels a tinge of sadness after his departure was hastened by his own party comrades.

But it was Abdullah who led the BN to its worst electoral outing in the 2008 general election - losing five states to the opposition and the ruling coalition's two-third majority for the first time.

But is Abdullah saddened by all this?

Judging from today's farewell luncheon, the 69-year-old dressed in black suit and blue and white tie appeared to have put those setbacks behind as he mingled with his staff in a jovial mood for the final time as their boss.

As Abdullah and his wife, Jeanne, walked into the banquet hall, they were greeted with a polite round of applause - a gesture that seems to say "well done Pak Lah, we are proud to have served you despite the odds".

Surely, Abdullah has reasons to celebrate today. From tomorrow onwards, he would no longer be entangled in a game that famous American writer Charles Bukowski described as the dirtiest of all - politics.

Of course, Abdullah is still the serving MP for Kepala Batas and it is up to him to decide just how deeply involved he still wants to be in future.

But the constant smile he wore this afternoon seems to indicate that he would be happier away from politics. He spared some time to take photos with journalists, walked around to other tables and spoke briefly to some of his staff.

"On behalf of Jeanne and (my late wife) Endon, I would like to thank you all. I also would like to say goodbye to those leaving the PM's Department," he added with a smile.

"I want to retire with an open heart and not have any hard feelings."

Abdullah steps down at a time when the economy is in dire straits and with non-Malays deserting the ruling coalition as demonstrated in the 2008 elections.

Abdullah was born in November 1939 in Penang, and his father was a founding member of Umno.

After gaining a degree in Islamic studies in 1964, he worked in the civil service before being elected to parliament in 1978, going on to hold the education and foreign affairs portfolios before becoming Mahathir's deputy in 1999.

No future for his aides?

The rise of another spells the departure of the old, and this goes for not just the generals but for their soldiers as well.

And for Abdullah's hardworking and loyal 'soldiers', they have yet to know what the future holds for them.

"Maybe I am going to take a long break. I'm not sure yet with what I want to do, maybe further my studies if I have the opportunity," he told Malaysiakini.

A press secretary to Abdullah said taking a long break would be a good idea after all she had been through with her boss during these "interesting times".

"Yes, I am going to take a break for a while. Let's see what happens after that," she said.

Maybe it's a good idea after all, not just for the press secretaries, but for Abdullah as well.