

He limps out with a whimper
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In 2006, writing about Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's mid-term review, I asked if his leadership which started with a bang may end with a whimper.

Today, this question has been answered. Abdullah limps out with a whimper. He will be remembered as a leader who was too eager to establish his own legacy but did very little to achieve anything.

Immediately after taking over the leadership, Abdullah introduced his moderate, modern and value-based of governance based on Islam Hadhari.

Several institutions such as Ikim (Institute of Islamic Understanding), RTM (Radio Televisyen Malaysia) and Jakim (Islamic Development Department) were tasked to propagate and explain the concept to the public.

Non-Muslims who were suspicious of the state sponsored Islamisation programme previously were not hostile to the more moderate form of Islam Hadhari.

Unfortunately, the concept was severely criticised by some segments of his own Muslim community including Dr Mahathir Mohamad. As a result, Islam Hadhari remained merely a concept which nothing solid to show.

The fact that other non-Umno component parties in BN had used PAS' Islamic ambition against DAP in the last few elections, a number of their leaders were careful not to get entangled with Islam Hadhari.

At the inception of his premiership, Abdullah had accurately read the mood of the people and their growing appetite for reforms.

In fact, he started with a bang by promising reforms in all domains. He had announced his administration's intention to stop the indulgence in mega projects. His intention was noble. It had received the thumbs-up from a vast section of Malaysians but not from his own leaders and party members.

For years, mega projects were used to grease Umno's gravy train. Several privatisation projects such as infrastructure, highways, utilities, transportation and others were awarded to political cronies. Hence, his predecessor was fuming when Abdullah announced the cancellation of the highly controversial 'crooked bridge' project from south Johor to Singapore.

Other leaders began to take a cue from Mahathir's protest and criticism. Most of them wanted big projects to continue. Umno is not just a political party, it is a multi-billion ringgit enterprise.

No choice but to backtrack

Abdullah did not have much choice but to backtrack from his earlier promise to stop spending on mega projects and to focus on building a soft skills and knowledge-based economy. He started several mega corridors which cost billions to build.

A number of other big-ticket projects were continued despite growing criticism e.g. the Bakun dam, double-tracking railroad, PGCC, Monsoon Cup and others.

There was a bitter lesson for Abdullah. It was not possible to stop patronage politics. The nexus between business and politics is too entrenched and deep.

Surprisingly, he was a quick learner. His son and son-in-law were accused of being the beneficiaries of patronage politics. He was a proud father who announced to the nation that his son was wealthy.

Abdullah tried to dabble with socio-political reforms. He directed the establishment of two royal commissions e.g. the Royal Commission on the Police Force and the Royal Commission on Lingam Tape.

The commissioners did a commendable job. They recommended the establishment of an Independent Police Complaints and Misconduct Commission and action to be taken against those implicated in the VK Lingam scandal. Abdullah sponsored the establishment of the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) and the Judicial Appointment Commission (JAC).

Alas, his legacy on socio-political reform is anything but tainted and wasted. The lack of action showed to us a leader who did not have the political will to walk his talk. He was not strong enough as a leader and lacked the political will to implement his vision.

He was too reluctant to stand up against his critics and foes. Abdullah wanted to be seen as a 'Mr Nice Man' but he did it foolishly and ended up destroying his own political legacy.

He did not implement the IPCMC. The reputation of the police force is at its lowest ebb since independence. Several actions taken by the police at the directive of the Home Ministry were too controversial and unnecessary. Issues of custodial deaths and investigation procedures were not addressed.

The police force was given more resources but it is professionalism, accountability and discipline that they needed. The involvement of two special task force security officers in the Mongolian woman murder case had badly tarnished the image of security forces in the country.

Since the formation of the JAC, Abdullah again displayed his lack of will to finish a reform job admirably. He appointed an ex-Umno legal officer to the highest judicial post in the country. In turn, the chief justice had extended the contract of the most controversial judicial commissioner in the country, who was involved in the Perak constitutional case.

There was no action taken against any of the personalities involved in the VK Lingam saga. Not even Lingam was prosecuted. Interestingly, Abdullah was able to find something each time to neutralise something positive he had started.

Khairy, his only legacy

The biggest mistake yet was to allow Mahathir the space, opportunity and time to relentlessly attack his leadership.

If he had defended himself vigorously against Mahathir's venomous allegations and criticisms, Abdullah would have demonstrated to both Umno and BN leaders that he was a man of his own.

Abdullah was too grateful to become a leader who can stand on his own feet. Mahathir had a field day to damage Abdullah's legacy before it was even built.

He had succeeded to a measurable extent to shift all faults, weaknesses, abuses and excesses which started in his era onto Abdullah's shoulders.

I was asked to name Abdullah's most visible legacy. There was not any worthy transformation of the economic, political or social systems. He did not help to expand and strengthen democracy in the country despite a naive leader calling him the 'father of democracy'.

During his tenure, Abdullah had clamped down on newspapers, bloggers, political opponents, partners (suspended MPs from his cabinet) and authorised the use of draconian legislation including the ISA.

His most lasting legacy is Khairy Jamaluddin. The newly-minted Umno Youth head had remained loyal and grateful to his father-in-law to the very last days.

No one had expected him to be crowned the head of Umno Youth, a coveted position wanted even by his nemesis' son Mukhriz Mahathir.

Khairy will be seen as a continuity of Abdullah's only legacy in Umno.

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