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Farewell to the 'Iron Lady'

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KUALA LUMPUR: For 20 years, she was the 'Iron Lady'. She stood up and spoke forcefully on issues that mattered to the country, not giving an inch without getting a yard.

For two decades, reporters who did not do their homework got a lashing from her acid tongue.

Yesterday, it was no different. For close to 40 minutes Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz was her confident self, poised and regal when answering questions thrown at her.

She was feisty and, if the question was not to her liking, sarcastic.

But when it was time to end the press conference and say her goodbyes, the tears flowed.

Earlier Rafidah, the world's longest serving international trade and industry minister, showed why she is called the "Iron Lady" when she stoically accepted Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's decision to drop her from the new cabinet.

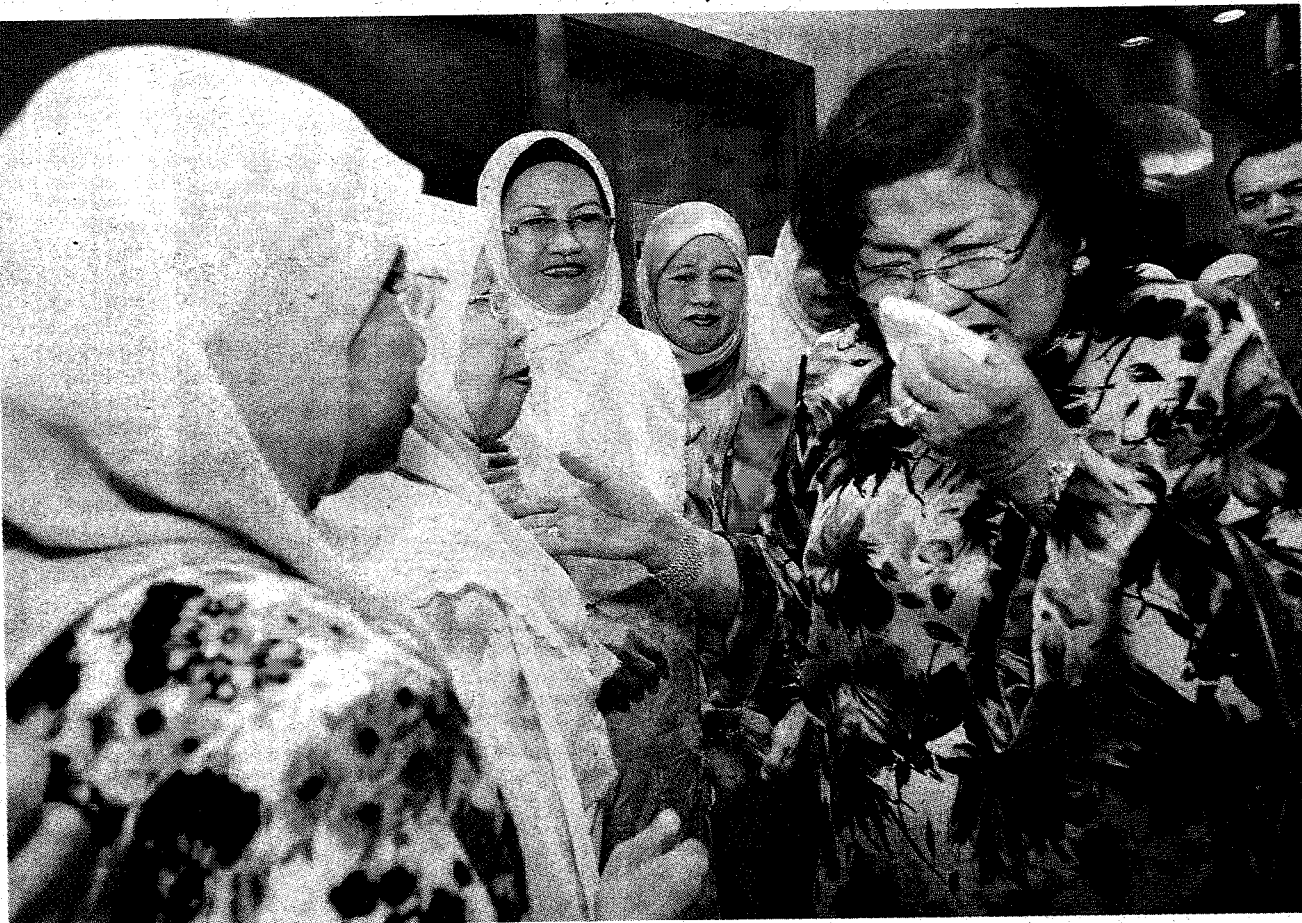
"I accept Abdullah's decision with an open heart because everybody should know when it is time to retire," she said.

"I was told at 9am on the day of the announcement that he would not be including me in the cabinet.

"I asked him why and he said it was because he wanted new faces. I accepted it because I have already served for so long and the time for retirement has arrived."

Rafidah said she didn't say anything to Abdullah, except to thank him and wish him luck with his new cabinet.

Not only did Rafidah dismiss speculation that she would step down as Wanita Umno



A tearful Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz saying her goodbyes to International Trade and Industry Ministry staff after the press conference yesterday. — NST picture by Ghazali Bujang

chief, she vowed to defend her post.

She also denied that she had been made a scapegoat for Barisan Nasional's poor showing in the elections.

However, Rafidah, who was accompanied by more than 20 senior Wanita Umno members, indicated that there was a lot of unhappiness with the prime minister's decision.

"I advise all Wanita members at all levels to stay calm. I know that many of them will have doubts and sadness.

"My advice to those who

have expressed their concern, is to hold your peace. Accept this with an open heart. We are still Umno members. We have to stay united."

She said that she wished Abdullah had told her not to contest in the general election if he had no intention to include her in the cabinet.

"I'm speaking very frankly. He didn't say I should not contest. He allowed me to contest.

"I'm a human being, you know. When I was chosen to contest, I did not imagine that I

would be dropped from the line-up."

Rafidah said she was not sad, as she had spent half her life working for the government.

"There's a sense of happiness. I can hold my head high and say I have served with integrity and accountability."

She bristled when asked about a letter she purportedly wrote to the prime minister, discussing her cabinet post.

"I can write it in all frankness. That's it. No copies made. Recipient received. Fin-

ished. What comes out of it, is not my doing."

She also vehemently denied that the decision to drop her had anything to do with the handing out of approved permits for imported cars — an issue which was harped upon by the opposition over the last few years.

"You are all barking up the wrong tree."

She paid tribute to the women's wing and said BN would have fared much worse in the elections if not for the work they put in.