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New PM differs greatly from predecessor

Malaysian leader aka 'Mr. Nice Guy'

By Jane Perlez
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KUALA LUMPUR, Malaysia — The new prime minister of Malaysia, Abdullah Badawi, a consummate diplomat abroad and well connected to the Islamic community at home, cuts an entirely different image from his volatile predecessor, Mahathir Mohamad.

Abdullah is known here as "Mr. Nice Guy," an endearment that could hardly be conferred on Mahathir.

But the new leader's basic policies are likely to provide a continuum for a prosperous nation that survived the Asian economic crisis better than most and is headed for nearly 5 percent growth this year.

Abdullah, 63, comes from a patrician family on Penang, the island that is the base for the technology firms, including Dell and Intel, that provided the exports for Malaysia's economic success in the 1990s. One of his challenges will be keeping Malaysia competitive as China becomes the fulcrum for low-cost manufacturing in the region, and India becomes a base for cheap back-office services.

A former foreign minister and defense minister, Abdullah wasted no time in sizing up the



A girl smiled yesterday as she held a picture of Malaysia's new prime minister, Abdullah Badawi, in the northern Malaysian island state of Penang. *Zainal Abd Halim / Reuters*

competition from China. In preparation for taking power, and in recognition of the fact that China has become Malaysia's fastest-growing trading partner, he visited Beijing several months ago.

At the same time, he is well regarded by U.S. officials, who say he is unlikely to repeat the anti-Western and anti-Semitic remarks of Mahathir.

"The different style of leadership provides a firm foundation for turning a new page in U.S.-Malaysia relations," said Ernest Z. Bower, the president of the U.S.-ASEAN Business Council, a group of major U.S. compa-

nies with investments in Southeast Asia. "There are clear signals from both the administration in Washington and the American private sector on the value of not prejudicing America's future relations with Malaysia and the new prime minister based on the past."

One of Abdullah's strengths appears to be the way he combines the traditional values of Islam with a modern outlook. His father and grandfather were religious leaders, and Abdullah graduated from the University of Malaya with a degree in Islamic studies.

"The religious leaders had a loathing for Mahathir; he was

too secular for them," said Karim Raslan, a Malaysian writer and lawyer. "But they can't write Badawi off."

For that reason, leaders of the governing party, the United Malays National Organization, believe that Abdullah will be able to retrieve some of the ground the party lost in 1999 to the conservative Islamic party known as PAS.

Some of the swing away from the governing party was attributed to Mahathir's prosecution and jailing of his former deputy, Anwar Ibrahim, and to allegations of cronyism within the party. Abdullah has made clear his distaste for some of the mega-infrastructure projects of the Mahathir era, including the extravagant new political capital, Purajaya. His reputation for clean government and his interest in rural development could help bring back some voters who fled to the Islamic party, the analysts said.

But Abdullah will not be making crass appeals to the conservative Islamic forces, they said. His wife, Endon Mahmood, projects herself as a modern Muslim woman, who appears in public without covering her head.

On his first day in office, the new prime minister ignored the ultramodern capital here and traveled to his home village, Kepala Batas, to see his mother and to break the Ramadan fast with his family.