

Late leader instrumental in grooming younger leaders

KUALA LUMPUR: Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, known affectionately as Pak Lah, was a statesman of quiet strength and unwavering grace whose legacy left an indelible mark not only on the nation but those around him.

Among them were Datuk Seri Dr Wee Ka Siong and Datuk Seri Azalina Othman Said, who were once budding youth leaders.

Dr Wee, who was former Johor Baru MCA division youth chief, recalled how Pak Lah provided the opportunity for young leaders to be part of Barisan Nasional's

historic victory in the 2004 general election.

"I still remember him as the leader who brought BN to victory, securing 199 parliamentary seats.

"That was the time I received my watakah (appointment letter) to contest the Ayer Hitam parliamentary seat under the BN banner," the MCA president told reporters at Masjid Negara.

Following that election, Dr Wee was appointed Deputy Education Minister, a role he attributed to the trust and leadership of Abdullah.

He praised the late premier's moderate and compassionate leadership, saying that he always listened to the voices of the people.

"He was a leader who always emphasised unity.

"He introduced Islam Hadhari, a moderate approach aimed at harmonising society and fostering mutual respect," Dr Wee said.

Azalina said Pak Lah paved the way for young Malaysian women in politics, as he strongly supported Puteri Umno when he was the main party's deputy president.

"It was he who started this culture of having young women leaders in politics. Pak Lah's legacy was that he was always a leader who created more leadership," she said after paying her last respects to Abdullah at Masjid Negara.

Azalina, a former Puteri Umno chief, also described Abdullah as having a cosmopolitan view of what the nation's multicultural society should aspire to be.

"He allowed the Malays to fight for our race and our religion but that did not mean we discrimi-

nate other races and religions," she added.

Azalina began her Cabinet years under Abdullah's administration when she was appointed as the Youth and Sports Minister in 2004, one of the youngest ministers at the time.

She fondly remembers Abdullah as a calm leader even when under attack.

"He didn't react and was not easily provoked, nor did he respond to gossip. He was basically extremely calm and an extremely nice man," she said.