

# A legacy of quiet leadership

Remembering Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's contributions to Malaysia and Asean.

THROUGHOUT my schooling and university years in the United Kingdom, my interest in politics and public policy was greatly catalysed by the fact that so many of my teachers and peers were interested in Malaysia: our institutions especially, with its long relationship with the British and the Commonwealth, and the kind of leadership that we had.

I had to have ready answers and offer opinions about constitutional monarchy, race relations and Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

During my A-Levels I was roped into my school's chapter of Amnesty International, which was keen to free former deputy prime minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim from political persecution.

By the time I started at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), Malaysia was frequently mentioned in politics classes because reformasi was often in the news, and I observed divisions among the large Malaysian student population too, with student societies taking opposing sides. (Some of the main actors are Cabinet ministers today.)

The appointment of Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi as prime minister in 2003 was therefore very keenly watched.

I was getting more active myself, signing on to the Abolish ISA Movement UK (AIM-UK) that was launched at LSE, marching against the Iraq War propagated by then UK prime minister Tony Blair and US president George W. Bush, and generally following developments in Malaysia.

It was a breath of fresh air when Pak Lah won his first general election in 2004, when he



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asked the people to "work with me, not for me". This simple statement marked a major shift away from the authoritarian mindset of the past, but the proof was to be in the pudding.

There was some pudding.

Stories emerged of how Pak Lah prevented some of his Cabinet members from deliberately instigating riots for political reasons, and instead he set a gentlemanly tone in accepting electoral setbacks.

Other institutions began to play a more meaningful role, especially the judiciary, with a highly symbolic reconciliation with judges who were sacked during the 1988 judicial crisis, and the passing of the Judiciary Appointments Commission Act in 2009.

This Act to improve the appointments of judges has become topical again as advocates seek to further strengthen their independence in the process.

But the greatest opportunities for growth were for civil society.

Thanks to an active blogging scene, I met other Malaysians in London interested in establishing a think tank in the mould of Westminster (or Washington's K Street), and we all agreed that it was only because of the increase in democratic space that we could even contemplate the idea.



**Pen pals:** In this file photo, Abdullah is sharing a moment with Chinese premier Wen Jiabao (centre) and Japanese prime minister Junichiro Koizumi (right) at the 11th Asean Summit at the Kuala Lumpur Convention Centre on Dec 14, 2005. — Bernama

That idea became the Malaysia Think Tank London, which evolved into the Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs (Ideas).

Abdullah received his fair share of criticism. Detractors noted that he was often literally or figuratively sleeping, though even here it can be generously interpreted that a hands-off approach actually spurred the growth of checks and balances.

Unfortunately, a non-interventionist attitude also enabled the perception that others around him, in particular the so-called "Fourth Floor Boys" - clever but ambitious lads - became too powerful and too corrupt.

News reports on Abdullah's lying-in-state focused on royal and political dignitaries, but I saw many civil society advocates, former activists and academics who owed the growth of their careers (and ultimately hugely significant contributions to nation

building) to the premiership of Pak Lah.

We were all glad to be able to thank him for his leadership one last time.

It was a strong reminder of the effectiveness of quiet leadership, and a stark contrast to the strongman demeanour that has punctuated our political history - and is palpable in the world today.

The strongman President of the United States has upended world trade in recent weeks, caused markets everywhere to roller-coaster, and has made policy-making - not just for governments, but for conglomerates and SMEs all over the world - unpredictable.

We have just welcomed the President of the People's Republic of China, on his timely visit to the region to strengthen cooperation with Asean.

These visits are hugely important, bringing new opportunities for jobs.

There is always a degree of scepticism among the Malaysian public when big deals are done with other countries, because certain politicians and business tycoons tend to benefit the most.

Such presumptions continue to surround the current political class, so it's crucial that the benefits reach the largest number of Malaysians possible.

The visit seemed to go well, but as Asean Chair, there will be many more diplomatic challenges ahead.

Here too, we can learn from Pak Lah's small but powerful gestures: as Asean Chair, he once helped to mend a rift between China and Japan by encouraging the passing of a pen between the two leaders.

Al-Fatihah.

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