

Malaysia has lost a gracious leader in former prime minister Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who was also a personal inspiration to me.

By ZURAINI MD ALI

ON April 14, 2025, Malaysia grieved the passing of not just a former prime minister, but a statesman of rare grace - Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

While many will remember him for his leadership, humility, and unwavering belief in moderation and good governance, my memory of him goes beyond the public figure: the kind, fatherly figure who spoke to a 17-year-old girl from a boarding school in Penang with warmth, sincerity, and quiet encouragement that would stay with her for the rest of her life.

It was 1985 - a year forever etched in my memory. I was a Form Five schoolgirl, preparing for my SPM trial examinations at a time when every paper felt like a mountain to climb. Amidst the pressure of school and expectations, I took part in a national writing competition organised under a newly launched campaign "Belilah Barangan Buatan Malaysia" (Buy Malaysian Made Products). I wrote from the heart, never imagining that my words would carry me far. First, I won at the Penang state level. Then came the unexpected news - I had won at the national level too.

I still remember how surreal it felt. The prize ceremony was to be held in Kuala Lumpur - the capital city I had only seen in textbooks and on television. It was a long way from my quiet hometown.

I sat for two trial exams early to make the trip, a mad rush made possible by my teachers' and my parents' support. With one teacher by my side, I boarded the express bus, clutching my small overnight bag and a head full of questions: Would it be grand? Would the minister be there? What would he say?

Upon arriving in Kuala Lumpur, we visited the Daya Bumi Complex, one of Malaysia's tallest and most modern buildings at that time. From the top floor, I looked out over the sprawling city below, a stark contrast to my quiet kampung life, thinking, "This is where dreams begin."

The award ceremony at Wisma



Malaysia's fifth prime minister Tun Abdullah, affectionately known as Pak Lah, in a file photo taken in October 2014. - ONG SOON HIN/The Star

Angkasapuri buzzed with excitement until Abdullah, who was then the Education Minister, entered. With calm and gentle authority, he immediately put everyone at ease.

When it was my turn to receive the prize, I walked up the stage with trembling hands and a pounding heart. He smiled kindly, handed me the award, and then did something I hadn't expected - he paused, looked me in the eye, and spoke to me, not as a politician, but as a father would to his daughter: "Tahniah! Terus belajar dan menulis." (Congratulations! Keep learning and continue writing.)

It was a short sentence - simple, almost ordinary - but to me, it meant everything. It felt like he saw me. Not just a name on a list or a winner of a prize, but a young girl with potential.

In that moment, I felt the warmth of fatherly encouragement - as if he were passing a torch into my hands and trusting me to carry it forward.

That brief encounter gave me strength, affirming my belief in education and the power of words. It taught me that even a poor kampung girl from Perak had a place in the world if I kept learning and stayed true to myself. His words stayed with me long after the applause faded and into the years that followed.

Now, 40 years later, as I write this tribute with a heart full of gratitude, I realise just how much that moment shaped me. It wasn't just about winning an award. It was about being lifted, being seen, and being inspired. That single sentence, spoken with care, became one of the guiding lights in my life.

Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi was more than a prime minister. He was a man of immense wisdom and quiet strength. He believed in nurturing the next generation, not through lofty speeches, but through genuine connection. He reminded us that leadership isn't always loud - sometimes, the most enduring legacies are built with compassion, humility and encouragement.

As the nation bids farewell to Pak Lah, I carry his words close to my heart, just as I

did that day in 1985. I say thank you - not just for your service to the country, but for the moment you took to speak to a young girl with a dream. You made her believe that she mattered.

May Allah bless Pak Lah. And place you in paradise. Because you have touched more lives than you will ever know.

Especially mine.

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The writer (pic) says Pak Lah reminds us that leadership isn't always loud - sometimes, the most enduring legacies are built with compassion, humility and encouragement. — ZURAINI MD ALI