

Thousands turn up to bid farewell

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■ By Koh Lay Chin
news@nstp.com.my

PUTRAJAYA, Fri. — Braving humid conditions, thousands thronged the Prime Minister's Department here today to bid a fond farewell to Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad and an enthusiastic welcome to his successor Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, with many saying they had "mixed feelings" about this "historic day".

Patiently waiting under the hot sun, the queue stretched half a kilometre from the lobby to the road. The people began arriving at 4pm. Among the many were hordes of photographers and journalists some taking up strategic positions to ensure a good view.

The crowd excitedly welcomed a calm and radiant Abdullah, who arrived around 4.30pm with his wife Datuk Seri Endon Mahmood.

Walking up the stairs, he looked back and waved enthusiastically, to the delight of all who had gathered.

Shaking hands with as many people as he could, he then went up to the Prime Minister's office on the fifth floor for a discussion with Dr Mahathir.

The Prime Minister's Department's principal assistant secretary Suhaimah Sukardi said many people wanted to see Dr Mahathir and welcome Abdullah, and braving the heat was a small price to pay.

"I feel sad that Dr Mahathir is leaving but we happily welcome Pak Lah."

Mohd Halikin Angga, a salesman from Sandakan, Sabah, said he had brought his entire family to Kuala Lumpur three months ago to see the last months of Dr Mahathir's leadership.

His two sons, five-year-old Mohd Mahathir and three-year-old Mohd Al-Amin, caught a lot of attention as they were dressed smartly in green traditional

Malay attire, complete with mini "civil-servant style" name tags.

Around 5pm, Dr Mahathir stepped out of the ground floor lift of the department and was immediately swarmed by photographers, who wanted a picture of him clocking out using the thumb-print scanner.

After reciting prayers, the atmosphere was charged as a frantic crowd surged to shake and kiss his hand, with some pushing forward.

Accompanied by Tun Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali, Abdullah, several Ministers and officials, a beaming Dr Mahathir shook hands with the crowd as many cameras clicked away furiously.

Shouts of "We love you!" and "Thank you Tun!" was heard as people rushed to him, with less lucky ones left to stand at the sidelines clapping to show their appreciation.

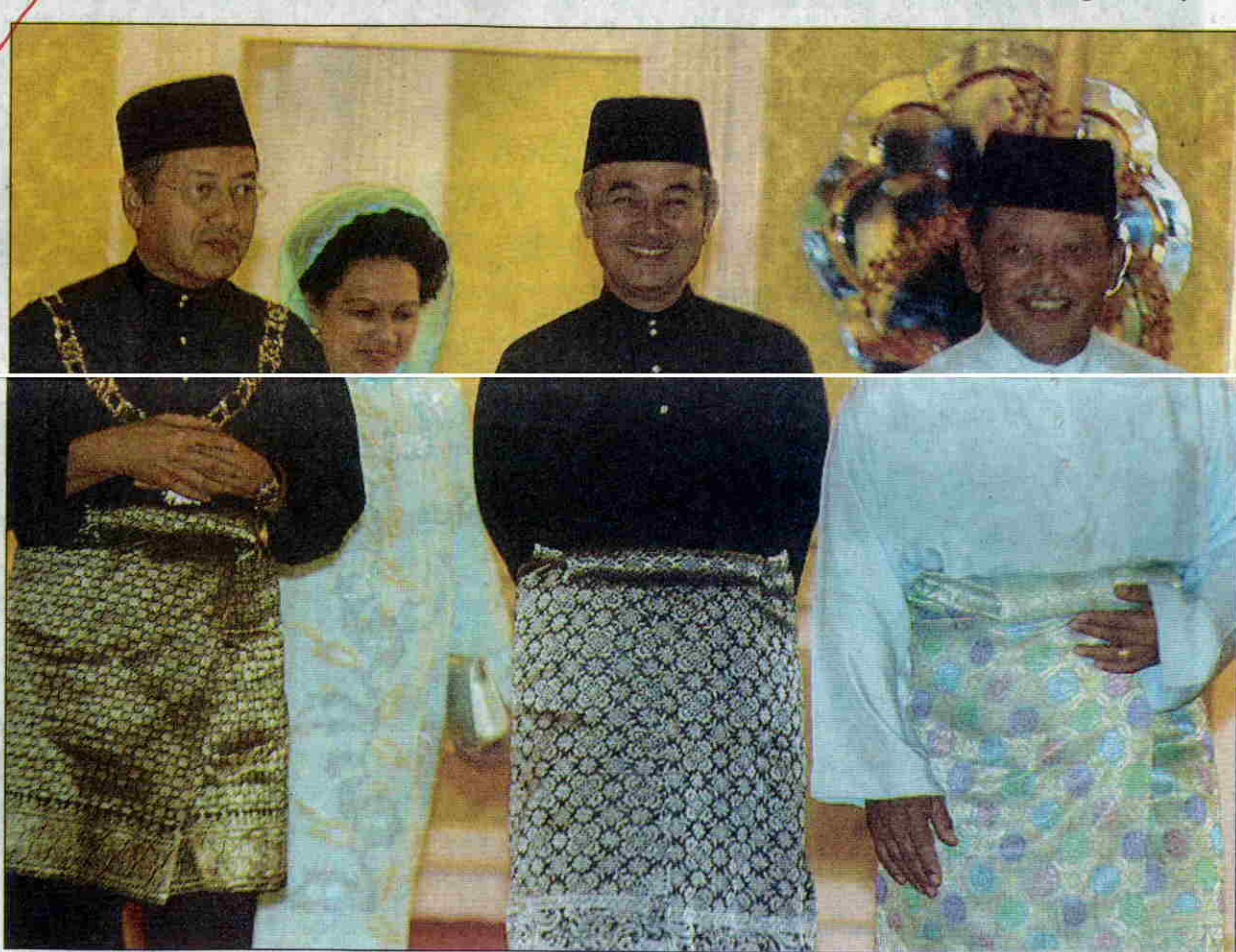
"There is a sense of sadness also. He has been Prime Minister since I was 17 and this will be a change. Just now, his expression was as if a heavy burden had lifted off his shoulders, so a well deserved leave will be very good for him.

"We are trying to get him to write a book, and that will be interesting," Mukhriz Mahathir said, adding that he thought his father would probably be heading to the Mediterranean for a two-week break.

Nearing the waiting car, Dr Mahathir later waved to the crowd after obliging what seemed like thousands of handshakes and in an immediate response, a heartfelt applause swept through the crowd.

As he and his wife entered the car, many called out their names.

At exactly 5.30pm, the black car with the number plate "Proton 2020" made its way to Seri Perdana for the couple to attend a closed-door breaking of fast with family members.



SMOOTH TRANSITION: Tuanku Syed Sirajuddin leaving the Balairong Seri after the swearing-in ceremony accompanied by the former and new Prime Ministers. Walking behind is Tuanku Fauziah.

WARM AND FRIENDLY: Abdullah acknowledging the cheers from civil servants who turned up in full force at the Prime Minister's Department in Putrajaya yesterday to greet the new Prime Minister. — NST picture by Hamsiah Abu Bakar.