

**How about asking the right questions on that book on Pak Lah?
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Only in Malaysia. Only in Malaysia, would there be an inquisition on a book assessing the performance of a former prime minister.

Who is the publisher? Are the editors linked to the opposition? Why is Nurul Izzah Anwar launching the book in Singapore? What is the motive behind the book?

Such is the ferocity of speculation and politicisation that the co-editors, academics James Chin and Bridget Welsh, have had to issue a statement clarifying that, A) the book is not Abdullah Badawi's memoirs; and, B) the book was not put together or sponsored by Abdullah Badawi.

The irony is that the man who has had his five years in office dissected is not the one kicking up a fuss over the book titled "Awakening: The Abdullah Badawi Years in Malaysia", even though there were some unkind remarks about him.

Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, who eyed the top job in Umno, wrote in the foreword that "perhaps it could be said, he fell into the same trap as many Third World leaders as he too succumbed to corrupting tendencies of power".

In a real tizzy over the book are politicians and bloggers linked to Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad who would like to paint the book as a collaboration between Abdullah and the opposition, and therefore worthy of vitriol and rejection by Umno.

Also in a spot of bother are Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak's strategists - the same people who led him to believe that a two-thirds majority was in the bag.

They too are wondering if there is a hidden hand behind the collection of essays and interviews on Abdullah's years as prime minister.

How about we assess the book for its content and nothing else? That is always a good starting point when reviewing a book.

Without a doubt, the most interesting part of the book is from pages 3 to 38, where Abdullah is interviewed on a laundry list of subjects from the attacks by Dr Mahathir to the dynamics in Umno, to worsening race relations in Malaysia.

The rest of the book contains a couple of other interviews and essays on Abdullah's performance in office by political commentators and academia.

Malaysians should read the book to get a better sense of the man who promised so much when he took over from Dr Mahathir in October 2003 and why he ended up delivering so little.

Unmistakable throughout the book is the sense that the man was completely overwhelmed by the expectations of the nation. It is akin to promising to win Malaysia's first Olympic gold medal but only having the skill and stamina to go past round two.

Also coming through crystal clear is the in-built resistance to change and reform offered by Umno during the Abdullah years.

This part is important for Malaysians to read and digest because it clearly shows a political elite unable and unwilling to do anything which would upset their place at the buffet line called Malaysia.

No matter who leads the ruling party, and how many slogans he can muster, Umno does not accept good governance, transparency, anti-corruption efforts, inter-faith dialogue.

The party's entrenched powers detest reform. Abdullah tried it, faced the blowback and walked away with a whimper. Najib Razak attempted it, got singed by Umno and Perkasa and is still licking his wounds.

So how can an obstinate political party that has become so detached from the aspirations of the majority of Malaysians bring light to this hope-starved country?

Can any personality in Umno's current second echelon line-up of Ali Rustam, Zahid Hamidi, Hishammuddin Hussein succeed where Abdullah, Najib and even the great Dr Mahathir failed?

These are valid questions to ponder as Malaysia celebrates its 50 years of existence.

Also worth reflecting and debating is the influence of Dr Mahathir himself. There has been precious little critical thought given to his 22 years in office. Most of the books and articles about him are sycophantic and self-serving.

The need for serious debate on Mahathirism is all the more important today, given the surge in nostalgia following GE13 among conservative forces in Umno and Perkasa for a return to the days of strong-man rule, the days of the ends justifying the means.

In this book, various commentators noted the fact that Abdullah or, for that matter, any leader post-Mahathir would have to clean up the mess left by the long-time prime minister. For example, Ooi Kee Beng wrote that Dr Mahathir had ambitions for Malaysia which were beyond any "dreamt by his opponents, or his followers".

"The projects he constructed in accordance to his grandiose imaginings were not necessarily good for the country. Furthermore, needing to get things done fast, he would adopt whatever means were available.

"His authoritarian style thus came to define Malaysian politics for at least two decades and his excesses, made possible by increasing oil revenues, changed the country's skylines and landscapes.

"Aside from extreme costs and corruption eating into the trajectory of national progress, the efficacy and reputation of major institutions - including the police, the judiciary, the mass media and the political parties - were damaged."

Abdullah with his softer image and more accommodating style initially gave Umno and Barisan Nasional a boost. A sense of liberation swept through the country.

But by 2007, dark clouds of despair started gathering when it became evident that Abdullah was unable to cut a new path for Malaysia, hemmed in by the conservative forces in Umno.

What followed was Barisan Nasional's worst electoral performance since it took power.

Ooi, the deputy director of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies wrote: "What he left unfinished is what his successor, Najib Abdul Razak, has to face. The mess that Mahathir left is still there, and what Abdullah learned was that there is no carpet big enough for that mess to be swept under."

It was also revealed in The Malaysian Insider last week that an authorised biography on Abdullah is expected to be released late next year. The book was commissioned early this year and will cover his life from before Merdeka until recent years.

So instead of worrying about who wrote what and who published it, surely it is more important for the health of Malaysia if we have a serious discussion on why Abdullah failed and what truly is the political inheritance bestowed on Umno and Malaysia by Dr Mahathir .
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