

Why Pak Lah responds to Mahathir's barbs with calm
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Of all the scorching questions Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad raised about Tun Abdullah Badawi's term as prime minister in his blog posting yesterday, the most painful was this: who lost five states to the opposition?

Ouch. But do not expect a tit-for-tat from Abdullah (pic). While his supporters in Umno and the opposition are hoping for a full-scale verbal war between the two former prime ministers, Abdullah is unlikely to oblige.

He has told friends that Dr Mahathir is inconsequential to his wellbeing and, despite the prodding by supporters, he is not interested in a sparring match. Further remarks on his relationship with Dr Mahathir are likely to be only in his memoirs, expected next year.

Also, truth be told, Dr Mahathir cannot hurt Abdullah on his poor electoral performance more than what Abdullah has been doing to himself.

Aides and friends of Abdullah say that the former prime minister frequently revisits the election results of 2008.

He knows that Malaysians gave him the strongest mandate in history in his first polls as prime minister in 2004 because they had grown wary of his predecessor and wanted a clean break from the past.

He still deeply regrets his failure to use that whopping mandate to clear Malaysia of the excesses of the Mahathir years: the endemic corruption, skewed privatisation, money politics in Umno, poor governance and the rehabilitation of the country's damaged institutions, including the judiciary and the police.

Instead of rising to the challenge, he buckled under pressure from conservative forces in Umno and was punished in the 2008 polls by Malaysians – losing Perak, Selangor, Penang, Kedah and Kelantan to Pakatan Rakyat as well as his coalition's two-thirds majority in Parliament for the first time.

So there is not much Dr Mahathir could do in his blog posting yesterday to vex Abdullah further on that point.

Dr Mahathir's blog was a response to comments Abdullah made in the book titled, *Awakening: The Abdullah Badawi Years In Malaysia*, about his prickly relationship with his predecessor.

In the book, a collection of essays and interviews, Abdullah said that had he succumbed to pressure from Dr Mahathir to continue his mega-projects, the country would have risked bankruptcy.

He also said that leaders who retired from office would serve the country best by staying silent and allowing the successor to govern and change policies.

Following the publication of those comments, it only became a matter of time when Dr

Mahathir would respond. He did so yesterday with some sarcasm.

"Just imagine how many billions would be saved if I had stepped down earlier before building the North-South Highway, Penang Bridge, KLIA, West Port, Putrajaya, Cyberjaya, the Petronas Twin Towers and a host of other mega-projects. We would be sitting on a mountain of ringgit," he wrote in his blog.

"It must have been a very rich Government which went for the 12th general election. Sadly the people did not appreciate the billions that were saved. They rejected the government party, giving 5 states and one federal territory to the Opposition, and just a small majority to the thrifty party," he said.

He also ridiculed Abdullah for cancelling his pet crooked bridge to Singapore and the railway double-tracking. The crooked bridge was killed off after the Attorney-General pointed out that certain agreements with Singapore prevented Malaysia from any unilateral action to build the bridge.

Abdullah's decision not to respond to all this will be welcomed by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak.

The PM in his several meetings with disgruntled Umno warlords has bellyached about how a public fight between his two mentors would complicate an already challenging political landscape.

Not everyone walked away with sympathy for Najib's predicament, with one Penang warlord remarking that Abdullah was entitled to give his version of events after being slammed continuously by Dr Mahathir since 2006.

There is also no guarantee that Abdullah's refusal to reply to Dr Mahathir's blog posting will lead to peace settling over the two old men of Malaysian politics.

Even before the book on Abdullah's years in office was published, Dr Mahathir had been hammering away at Abdullah, blaming him for opening up democratic space and allowing more openness, both of which were used by the opposition to entrench its position.

For him, Abdullah's comments in the book was not just a matter of his nemesis having a go at him but also he was raising questions about the utility of Dr Mahathir's mega-projects and his legacy as the man who built modern Malaysia. Worse yet, Abdullah's standing as former Umno president and PM lends serious weight to the criticism of financial recklessness.

So far, only Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim and other opposition politicians and critics have accused Dr Mahathir of throwing away money on his mega-projects.

As Ooi Kee Beng, the deputy director of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, noted in an essay in the book: "The projects he constructed in accordance to his grandiose imaginings were not necessarily good for the country... 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." – August 23, 2013.

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