

'A brother, father, leader and mentor'

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BY GAVIN GOMEZ

IF the ultimate measure of a man is how he stands in times of challenge and controversy, then according to long time aide and friend Datuk Abdul Aziz Shamsuddin, the resilience of Dr Mahathir is something that has to be admired.

Former political secretary and now Deputy Education Minister Datuk Abdul Aziz Shamsuddin said even during Dr Mahathir's most trying times - when the Constitution was amended in 1993 to limit the powers of the country's rulers, the sacking of former deputy prime minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim and the 1997 financial crisis - the Prime Minister stood tall, cool and composed, to uphold what he believed in and what was best for the country.

"He felt alone when the Constitution was amended to make rulers liable for their actions in their personal capacity. Even a number of Cabinet ministers were scared to back him. In the three Umno general assemblies following Anwar's sacking in 1997, he was booed by certain quarters.

"But Dr Mahathir was determined to make decisions that upheld all that was good for Malaysia. For this, we must admire him," he added.

Abdul Aziz's first encounter with Dr Mahathir was in 1975 when the former, then a junior officer with the Education Ministry's Curriculum

Development Centre, was introduced to his Minister, Dr Mahathir.

"Dollah (Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi) who was then with the Youth Ministry introduced me to him. I was shocked to learn soon after that Dr Mahathir wanted me to serve as his political secretary, which I did from March 7 that year till 1999 when I was appointed Deputy Education Minister.

Since then, Abdul Aziz said, he and Dr Mahathir have grown very close - "a brother, father, leader and mentor."

"He is a man who made things happen for our country," said Aziz, adding that he remembered the trying times when the Prime Minister walked into office looking sad and depressed, with his hair ruffled.

Abdul Aziz said throughout Dr Mahathir's 22 years in office, he had his friends and foes but "being the compassionate and forgiving man that he is, the relationships shared were always dynamic."

"Even Anwar, who was against him in the early days, was groomed to be his successor but we all know how that turned out. Dr Mahathir was very hurt and disappointed with Anwar," he added.

Abdul Aziz's career as Dr Mahathir's political secretary was also not without controversy.

When Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah challenged Dr Mahathir for the Umno presidency in 1987, Abdul

Aziz's loyalty was called into question.

"It was a very difficult time for me. All sorts of accusations were flying around, as I was a friendly person who mixed with all my Umno brothers and sisters.

"The enemies within Umno said all sorts of things about me that were untrue. I can only thank God that instead of forcing me into retirement, Dr Mahathir believed in my support to later appoint me as deputy education minister," he added.

Abdul Aziz said that if there was one love that persisted throughout Dr Mahathir's career, it was his love and push for education.

"In the late 70s and early 80s, he used to entertain groups of students of no less than 80 every fortnight to hear their thoughts on issues.

"He would advise them to study hard and urge them to help those who were less fortunate to obtain an education. Dr Mahathir knew that for the country to progress, the population had to be educated," Abdul Aziz said.

Assuming office at the time of the New Economic Policy, Dr Mahathir was



Deputy Education Minister Datuk Abdul Aziz Shamsuddin when visiting the Petrosains at KLCC.

careful to implement policies favouring bumiputras.

"Non-bumiputras were securing places in public universities with better grades than their bumiputra counterparts in the 1970s. Dr Mahathir

was determined to push bumiputra students to do better and did a lot to help them."

He even organised special talks and summer camps for bumiputras studying overseas to keep them motivated.

"In 1975, a group of Institut Teknologi Mara (now a university) students came to ask him for help as they could not afford to pay for their textbooks. He told them to wait for an hour and later returned with a cheque for RM6,000.

"That is the sort of person he is. He was willing to give his own money to help bumiputra students.

"Sadly, even now he continues to express frustration with bumiputras but it is only because he loves us," Abdul Aziz said.

He added that Dr Mahathir only continued to push bumiputras because he knew that one day all races would have to vie for public university places on an equal footing.

Because of his ways, including his ability to speak up against Western leaders, Dr Mahathir has become a well-respected leader.

"All the world's leaders have great respect for him as he speaks his mind. To him a spade's a spade and he says so," Abdul Aziz said.

On Dr Mahathir's relationship with Umno, Abdul Aziz said:

"He loves Umno and Umno loves him but as he has also said, the success of the party is also due to the other component parties that make up Barisan Nasional."