

Carrying On The Tradition

As the new Prime Minister of Malaysia, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi faces very high expectations from a citizenry used to the drive and dynamism of his predecessor. But his years of experience as a student leader, civil servant and politician should serve him well.

By A Kadir Jasin

To me it was an ultimatum. And it was also the will of God. – Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi recalling a meeting he had with leaders of the Kepala Batas Umno division in 1978.

THEY had met him to ask him to consider contesting the general election to be held that year.

'I could still remember my friends from the Kepala Batas division saying to me, if Cik Lah wants to enter politics, it would better be now, but if you still feel like postponing your decision, you might as well forget (about politics),' said Abdullah in an interview with *Utusan Malaysia's* Rosnah Majid in 1984.

He heeded their warning and went on to win the Kepala Batas parliamentary constituency with a thumping majority over his Pas rival.

The story has it that Datuk Mohamad Noor, then secretary to the Kepala Batas division, and Tan Sri Murad Mohd Noor, then Director-General of Education, were among those responsible for originating the ultimatum.

Since then, there was no turning back for the Penang-born Abdullah. He has gone through the best and worst in politics – from the rising star in Dr Mahathir's Cabinet to an outcast and back again with new vigour.

Today, 25 years after accepting the ultimatum, Abdullah is Malaysia's fifth Prime Minister.

Explaining his political antecedent, Abdullah told the *Utusan Melayu*: 'I was brought up in a political and religious environment. My interest in politics took root when I was still in school. And when I was at the University of Malaya, I was a student leader and president of GPMS (Federation of Peninsula Malay Students).'

At 64, Abdullah is not exactly young. Dr Mahathir and Tun Hussein were both 56 when they became Prime Minister. Tunku Abdul Rahman was 54 and Tun Razak, 48.

But Abdullah has the distinction of being the transitional man – born during the turbulent days of Second World War, raised during the closing years of British rule and maturing during the early days of Independence.

He had his primary education at the Permatang Bertam Malay School and attended the Dearatul Maarif Wataniah Religious Secondary School. His secondary education was completed at the Bukit Mertajam High School and The Methodist Boys School.

Those days, many well-known schools were run by Christian missionaries or were affiliated to churches. Many Malay students who did not find their way to such elite schools as the Malay College in Kuala Kangsar or the Penang Free School, ended up in these mission schools.

This early experience with multiculturalism combined with his staid religious upbringing served to influence the development of Abdullah's character and political views.

Thus, despite graduating in Islamic Religious Studies from the University of Malaya in 1964, Abdullah finds himself at home in the cross-cultural environment. In fact, in the true tradition of Islamic scholarship, he is reluctant to show off his deep understanding of the religion and his pioussness.

When this writer, in a meeting with him soon after he was appointed Deputy Prime Minister in January 1999, suggested that he was the first modern *ulama* to be appointed to the post and might one day become the Prime Minister, he responded: 'Oh no, that is the last thing I will claim to be. *Ulama* is an august title that should not be put in jeopardy by mixing it with political leadership.'

But he reluctantly acknowledged that he knows some Arabic and that he understands the Quran and is able to translate it. He regularly leads the *solat* (the five daily prayers) and presides at religious functions.

Being from Penang, he also holds the distinction of being the first Prime Minister to come from a Malay minority state that happens to be one of the most developed in the country.

Speaking on that point in the 1984 *Utusan Malaysia* interview, Abdullah said: 'The (inferior) position of the Malays in Penang was one of the factors that motivated me to take an active part in politics as I believe that the improvement of their status can only be achieved through political means.'

He has been true to his words. Despite the ups and downs in his political fortunes, Abdullah has shown undivided loyalty to Umno. He remained with the party when a large section of the 'Team B' leadership left Umno following their failure to unseat

now defunct Parti Melayu Semangat 46), Abdullah said his differences were with Dr Mahathir and not with party members. When members voted in favour of Dr Mahathir, he had to respect their decision.

With that episode in mind, questions have continued to be asked whether there is a possibility of Musa and Tengku Razaleigh making a comeback or at the very least covertly exerting influence on Abdullah's administration.

While Musa, who is now 69, has been giving the impression that he is out of politics for good, Tengku Razaleigh, 66, is still very much in the thick of it. Besides being an MP for Gua Musang in Kelantan, he is also a nominated member of the Supreme Council, the policy-making body of Umno.

But observers generally feel that the

that Abdullah would focus his attention on regenerating the leadership of the party and government instead of dabbling in nostalgia.

This is based on the fact that he has vigorously been reaching out to the younger crowd since being appointed Deputy Prime Minister. The move received an indirect endorsement from Dr Mahathir when he recently commented that older leaders should make way for younger ones.

As far as national policies are concerned, the consensus is that Abdullah is unlikely to make major changes. This is partly because he was a key member of the group that helped formulate the post-May 13, 1969 policies, including the New Economic Policy (NEP).

He was Principal Assistant Secretary to the National Operations Council (NOC) from 1969 to 1971 when the NEP was formulated and launched.

What is more likely to happen is a change in the administrative style and modification of some policy approaches and programmes.

Since most of the large infrastructure projects have either been completed or are in the process of being constructed, Abdullah has more time to plan and implement people-oriented projects and programmes.

Aides say Abdullah has a keen interest in food production and the environment, in particular the management of water resources. The last was made plainly apparent when his Kepala Batas constituency became one of the worst hit by the recent floods.

But having been used to two decades of Dr Mahathir's time-driven break-neck pace of development, the people may expect Abdullah to keep the same pace and observe the same discipline, albeit with a kinder face.

A combination of the years of experience as a student leader, civil servant and politician should place Abdullah in a good position to carry on the leadership tradition left behind by Dr Mahathir and the Prime Ministers before him.

As he said in the 1984 interview with the *Utusan Malaysia*, he had no promise to make other than to serve sincerely for the good of the party, the race, religion and country. **mb**



Having the last laugh: Young Abdullah (standing fourth from left) with committee members of the Penang and Seberang Perai Malay Students Association in the 1950s

Dr Mahathir in the 1987 party elections. Abdullah was the next most senior member of the team after Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah and Tan Sri Musa Hitam.

When this writer asked him soon after the defeat of 'Team B' why he opted to remain in Umno when his other collaborators had either withdrawn from the party or formed a new political party (the

possibility of this happening is remote. They also do not see Musa and Razaleigh getting together to exert influence on Abdullah. By now it has become known to all and sundry that the failure of their 1987 challenge against Dr Mahathir was mostly due to the deep-seated distrust between them.

On the other hand, the observers feel