

The Accession of a Servant Leader:

Dato' Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi

Datuk Dr Paddy Bowie

Dato' Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, as I write, reaches his second anniversary in office. He became our fifth Prime Minister and the CEO of Malaysia Inc. on 1 November 2003. This was no regime change but a planned transition. Nor was it part of a government overthrow from Democrat to Republican, from a Clinton to a Bush. The National Front has been in business, unbroken, for 46 years, an enviable continuity. The management is different.

Leadership change is taking place throughout the Asia Pacific, often with a degree of turmoil and springing its surprises. The Malaysian succession was preordained. No head hunting needed. Dato' Seri Abdullah had been the heir apparent since 1998 on becoming the Deputy Prime Minister in the time honoured "embedded" tradition of UMNO, where they prepare for succession the second and third levels down, ensuring the candidates are identified and well groomed to take over, as is frequently the practice in business. The selection is a unique blend of democracy and protocol. The "boss" has a say in nominating his successor but it must be ratified by the Board, in this case the Party, and including the verdict of



the ballot box. In the last respect, you can say it is more democratic than the private sector.

Nor was Dato' Seri Abdullah a sudden and arbitrary choice. This was the man in whom Tun Dr Mahathir placed his trust and confidence – a safe pair of hands into which to consign his precious Vision 2020. Malaysia Inc. works to a Vision and Mission such as you see enshrined nowadays on the walls of most corporate offices. Abdullah had been prepared to wait his turn quietly. Patience is one of Abdullah's long suits. In fact, he had to endure some time on the dark side of the moon. When Team B failed in its leadership challenge and most of them exited to form Semangat 46, Abdullah (and Musa) stayed behind, still faithful to UMNO but stripped of office. It took a long time to forgiveness but he earned it. This was

implicit in Tun Dr Mahathir choosing him even as his Deputy. One innovative step was that Tun Dr Mahathir agreed to a fairly protracted period of transition before finally stepping down. A handover is standard practice in the corporate sector but it is a luxury in politics. So Abdullah was extra well prepared for the challenges ahead.

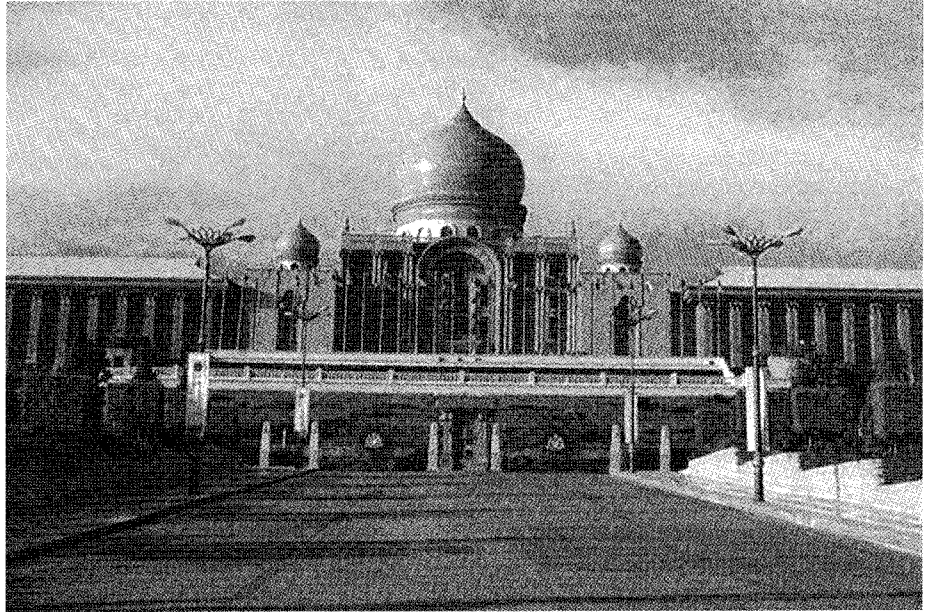
We need to go back to 1981 when his first Ministerial post was in the Prime Minister's Department happily coinciding with Tun Dr Mahathir's accession. This brought Abdullah into close proximity with the seminal policies that introduced at the outset, a series of bold reforms. We saw a reprise when Abdullah himself first took office, and surprised us all with his own reform agenda at the ready.

He had received the "torch" and had to run with it, the torch being the 2020 Vision. Asked what his own vision would be, Abdullah dismissed the notion with, "There is no need to dream any more dreams". The momentum of Tun Dr Mahathir's blueprint for taking Malaysia to advanced nation status would be maintained. There are parallels in the private sector. Tan Sri Azizan and Tan Sri Hassan Marican created a Vision and a Mission for the first time for Petronas. The former, largely the contribution of the late Tan Sri Azizan, survives to this day carried on by his successor. Dato' Seri Abdullah continues Dr Mahathir's declared Mission at the strategic level; so we have seen a continuity in Malaysia's major policy stance; only mainly at the tactical level has there been room for change – significant change at that. And of course, a conspicuous difference in leadership style.

Tun Dr Mahathir was a hard act to follow given his unsurpassed vision, immense authority, and hard driving style. In his 22 years the country underwent a major restructuring. Not surprisingly. The man at the helm was a serial innovator. Success was Mahathir's legacy. Abdullah now had to manage that success. We moved from magisterial to management rule.

Administration is Abdullah's forte. He had been through the system – came up through the ranks. With a lifetime career spent in the Public Service, he brought to his task as Chief Executive an in-depth knowledge of the workings of the Government. By personal temperament, his conciliatory ways made him well suited

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also to the external role of Chief Representative of his country. He had served 8 ½ years as Foreign Minister. His style of diplomacy is non-confrontational in contrast to the sometimes pugnacious stance of his predecessor. He is busy mending fences. Still makes a principled stand – on issues like Iraq or Palestine – can be firm when needed. But at the same time, he exemplifies the Malaysian philosophy of constructive engagement. Today's managers also have an obligation

in terms of global interactions.

Tun Dr Mahathir could never be suspect of cloning. It was clear from the start that Abdullah is his own man – comfortable in his own skin. But what manner of man in this? If we speak in branding terms, his one distinctive quality is likeability; his one most identifiable visual characteristic, his smile. “Pak Lah” as he is affectionately known is of a gentle disposition. Even with access to high office, he has never lost his modest

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ways. “I am the No. 1 servant of the realm” is his dictum. This can be easily misunderstood. Westerners often mistake a natural Malay reticence for timidity or weakness when it is just plain courtesy. Abdullah is a *halus* (proper) Malay gentleman. His quiet low-key manner fits well with the Malay temperament, resonates with the grassroots – makes him an archetypal UMNO politician.

In managerial terms, this is the Malay *kepimpinan* style of leadership. The Western concept sees the leader as literally giving the lead – out there in front urging his men to follow and keep up with him – a recipe for individual assertiveness. The Bill Gates, Richard Bransons, Jack Welch all stand tall ahead of their people. By contrast the *kepimpinan* leader does not get out of line. His job is to reflect the consensus. His is a more consultative style. A leader does not need to be aggressive to be effective. He listens and he consults, hears out the advisors, technocrats, strategists then makes his final considered decision - in Dato’ Seri Abdullah’s case, he is careful to accept the consensus. He has already taken note of the insistent demands of youth and has set up his own “A” team of impressive, bright, eager youngsters balanced by a senior group of trusted mentors. The former has met with opposition from the old guard. Managers always have to deal with resistance to change.

But how strong would he be is a perennial question from the beginning. It is easy to underestimate him. A clue to the iron fist lurking in the velvet glove, if one were needed, is that he has been Home Minister for some time with the unenviable task of rounding up dangerous militants - a duty he has never shirked in his responsibility for “homeland security”. And if further evidence is sought, we have one example where he proved his mettle as a crisis manager. At the now famous Assembly where Dr Mahathir delivered his bombshell, pandemonium broke out. Abdullah calmed the crowd, took charge authoritatively. But it is what he said that was most significant – “We are not going to accept this resignation”. The one person who stood to gain by acquiescing in Tun Dr Mahathir’s declared intent was his Deputy. Had he done nothing, by the end of the Assembly, he would have been Prime Minister. I know of few power hungry politicians who would have been able to resist the opportunity presented to them on a platter. Instead, Abdullah negotiated a stay of execution. We were seeing in action that rare species – a selfless politician.

How effective has he been since then? On his accession and to most people’s surprise, he hit the ground running – wasted no time in announcing a bold and stringent reform agenda. He was very much in line with the new practice where recently appointed CEOs crack it along for the magic first 20-day record on which the media is bound to focus. Abdullah got rid straight off several mega projects, in the interest of fiscal prudence. This was no puppet. Many of his actions like cancelling the railway project and delaying the Bakun Dam directly overturned some of

Tun Dr Mahathir’s last acts. In business, we would say it was the new broom sweeping clean. But Abdullah is not the kind of new man who sets about undoing all his predecessor did in order to make a mark. The consistent policy under 2020 remains. Abdullah has maintained Malaysia’s brand of sustainable politics and is faithful to the baton handed on to him. Within this consistent framework, the new CEO mapped out the equivalent of a Business Plan – his strategy. He was going to clean up the private sector and smarten up the public sector. There were scathing references to “bloated and leveraged conglomerates with attendant monopolies and big concessions” - the words of a man on the warpath. He believes the Government should be a facilitator of business, not a provider of contracts and concessions, except to ensure a wider distribution to the small man, not just the favoured few.

He was setting out the terms of engagement for Malaysia Inc.

He also declared outright war on corruption, patronage and abuse of trust. He himself was uncontaminated, totally above suspicion. The leader sets the example. He instituted the Royal Police Commission, resolved to galvanise the Public Service out of their inertia, and introduced KPIs – key performance indicators emulating the appraisal systems and accountability of the civil service. A hands-on manager, he very early on paid a random, unheralded visit to the Immigration Department with eye-opening effect. Censure has fallen on the layers of bureaucracy and red tape. He inveighed against poor execution, inept management, appalling customer service and shocking maintenance. The Malaysian modern day dilemma he summed up as “First World infrastructure with a Third World mentality”. Managerial reform always begins with this type of trenchant managerial audit - problem oriented, solutions driven.

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Malaysia” and the “Ugly Malaysian”. In the private sector, he wanted to get away from political patronage, the dependency mindset and the rent mentality. He urged the Bumiputras to throw away their crutches or they would end in a wheelchair, preferring to develop their capabilities to compete with the best, which by now is a global best. In this Knowledge Age, human

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capital is our greatest asset. Abdullah wants the private sector and our higher education system to nurture talent for the contemporary world. He demands more civic virtue, ethics in business and corporate governance – i.e. a Millennium practitioner.

Meritocracy became the new order of the day. In Khazanah and its 41 government-linked companies (GLCs), the corporate chessboard was swept clean of the politically favoured from the Know Who era to be replaced by a batch of professionals – young Malaysian captains of industry shaking up traditional business.

Before his resolve could be put to the test, however, there came a hiatus. For most of 2004, he was preoccupied, of necessity, with domestic issues beginning with the General Elections which, coming when they did, were a referendum on his reform agenda. He won a stunning record victory of 90.4% of the seats in the House. If businessmen are judged by the stock market price, for politicians it is votes. This was the best performance ever. Much of it was down to Abdullah's personal popularity. Charisma counts. It also halted the green wave of parochial, reactionary “Islamatisation” represented by PAS who were all but decimated at the ballot box. He was now seen for what he is - a role model of modern, progressive, enlightened Islam.

With the selection of his Cabinet came the first disappointment. Some of those who survived were deemed to be tainted or over the political hill. There is no set retirement age for politicians. Abdullah was also constrained having to honour the wishes and the nominations of his National Front partners. Power sharing is the political credo in this country of which Abdullah is a willing participant. It is said of him that taking the

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consensual view always, he sometimes appears to sacrifice his own judgment. It is rather that he is adroit in reconciling public opinion with his own vision in the democratic spirit. His style is the very opposite of autocratic. His transition ended with the UMNO General Assembly in its vital triennial Elections year. The Assembly is the equivalent, you might say, of a company AGM with leaders accountable to their shareholders. It did not

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go as well as he might have expected. Money politics was rife. The top team that emerged would not necessarily have been of his choice but he is to a degree, captive of the Party.

If the transition period is seen as a relay race, we had then reached the last lap – the final baton passed. It was now up to Abdullah to perform on his pledges of reform – to walk the talk. The euphoria is over. And now he began to come under criticism for what is seen as non-delivery. The Police Report was duly published but so far, little seems to have been done. Petty crime and equally petty police corruption appear just as rife. High level corruption and rent seeking appear relatively unchecked. *The International Herald Tribune* described Abdullah as “timid, cautious, weak and indecisive”.

Only if sweeping reforms materialise can the PM move on to the broader agenda for the country. People are impatient, a trifle unreasonably so, and do not give the time this conscientious, careful man requires. There has been some progress we need to acknowledge in the Annual Report. Isa Samad has already been dealt with – a start made on money politics. There is greater transparency. Khazanah, the test case for meritocracy, needs time for the new breed to prove themselves, but are going full steam ahead, including doing a roadshow in the UK/US to showcase Malaysia to fund managers. The “Dream Team” were all industry giants, not your usual Government spokesmen who were only seen as purveyors of the Party line – the “embedded” national apologists. Islamic banking is prioritised to make Malaysia a *halal* hub – the international perspective mandated also of today’s business. He is busy mending fences and has smoothed a few ruffled feathers in the region – in Singapore and Australia particularly, extending the hand of friendship.

Prime Minister Abdullah concentrates on the software. His focus is not on the hardware. The latter is more visible to the naked eye like infrastructure and has a more immediate impact. Moral issues take a lot longer to fix and often with nothing concrete to show. Only later are we aware of a healthier environment. Corruption free, for one thing. But this takes time. It is like treating the diseased tap root that has burrowed deep into the ground (as corruption can be entrenched). But if you

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work too fast or over hastily, you can kill the tree.

Will he succeed? To answer this, one has to consider the intrinsic qualities he brings to the task – that put his personal stamp on it. All around us in our neighbours, uniforms are prevalent – Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, ex-General; Hsien Loong, ex-General; Thaksin, ex-Police Commissioner. Uniforms equate with power. One thinks of Hitler youth and all those jackboots. And power can always tempt one towards extra judicial power. Malaysia has a man of God who without these outwardly visible macho symbols may look weak by contrast. His strength is invisible – an inner spiritual strength. He works to a moral compass. Integrity and moral fibre are rare commodities in today’s world. He can be expected to temper material advancement with justice and compassion. Islamic values are after all at the same time universal ones. The private sector has similarly had to learn to factor social responsibility into its quest for profit.

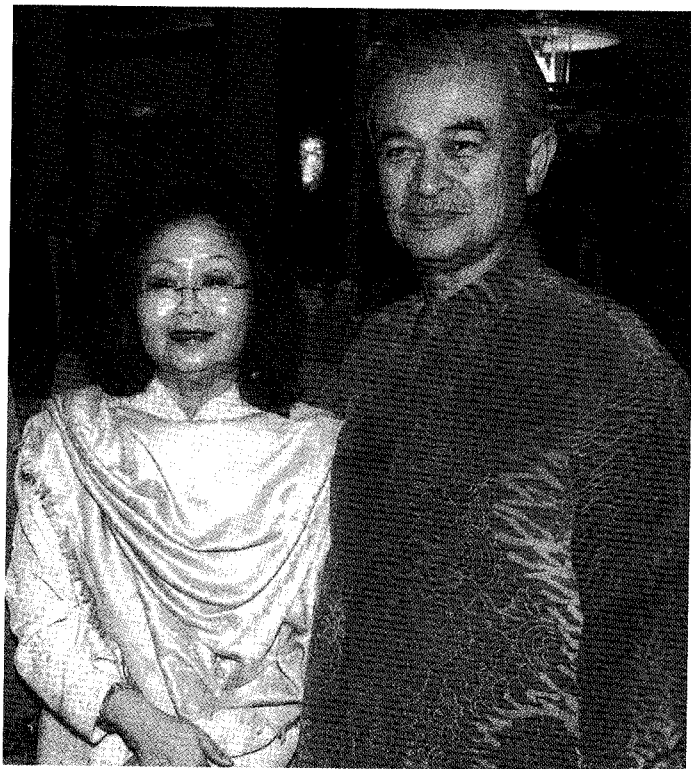
Malaysia has a happy knack of surfacing the right man at the right time. The unlikeliest of candidates for office have proved themselves the man of the hour, owing to some inherent quality

Postscript

Since writing this article, we have had the tragic loss of Datin Seri Endon, the beloved wife of Dato' Seri Abdullah.

She will be much missed in her own right for the gracious lady she was, and all her unremitting work for charity. In the present context, we focus on her role and position as the First Lady in political terms.

The management equivalent is the role of the corporate wife, which is much more significant in this society where business and social life overlap at every turn. The more discerning of the multinationals when sending out an expatriate, take the trouble to make sure that his or her spouse is happy to uproot



themselves not only to live in but to adapt to a foreign culture. It is not the manager or executive who is sent abroad but the family unit. Their adjustment to their new surroundings is critical. In the past, there have been executives who cut short their tour because their wives were not happy. Those who remain - the vast majority - do a sterling job of supporting their husbands with hospitality, community work, etc. These expatriate wives are also more socially exposed to Malaysian society, being less homebound. How much more do all these apply to the political wife.

This article pays tribute to Datin Seri Endon who not only fulfilled her duties as the Premier's lady but exemplified for us par excellence also what Dato' Seri Abdullah so fervently believes - the importance of the family and family values. Our condolences go first to her nearest and dearest - and also to the nation for what was a very real loss to us all.

apt for the temper of the times. No one expected Jack Welch to become the head of GE, let alone today's foremost recognised guru of management. Abdullah Ahmad Badawi is the most credible Muslim leader we have had. From a long line of Islamic clerics and scholars, he did Islamic studies at the university (in preference to an offered scholarship in Economics, the orthodox business preference). He is a deeply and sincerely devout Muslim but favours an interfaith accommodation. The increase in religiosity threatening to polarise our Muslim community poses the new Malay Dilemma. He counters the politicising of religion and the encroachment of the more reactionary even deviationist forms of Islam, and does so beyond conviction. He goes into action codifying the principles of modern progressive Islam in his *Islam Hadhari* (Civilisational Islam). He is just as keen to begin a process of reform and renewal in religion as in secular affairs. Progress, he feels, is enjoined not only in Islam but by Islam that is compatible with modernity, yet firmly rooted in the noble values of the religion, focused on ethics not rituals.

He takes the helm at a time when as an Islamic country, Malaysia is in the spotlight of world attention. The other torch he has been handed is to preserve its newly acknowledged positioning as a successful democratic Islamic country and as a moderate, progressive Islamic regime.

The question now is whether he can parlay the role of CEO of Malaysia Inc. into a truly global statesman, just as corporate executives and businessmen today are required to be global players. He has to fill not one but three giant footprints. Besides the domestic gauntlet involved, he now heads the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) representing 116 developing countries or four fifths of the world population and 57 Muslim countries, respectively. This jockeying him into a critical international role. Strong leadership is now called for if the weaker developing world is to win its rightful place in any system of world governance. OIC is a special case - a crucial Islamic constituency in a world where a dangerous divide yawns between Islam and non-Islam.

These multiple responsibilities at a geo-political level reflect the expanded stewardship in the private sector where global giants are created by mergers and acquisitions in a globalised world - a daunting task in both cases.

In summation, if we were to characterise the present leader in a word - where Dr Mahathir was a Visionary and a Super Salesman, Abdullah is a Reformer and an Islamic envoy. □

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