

ABDULLAH AHMAD BADAWI

Minister of Foreign Affairs
March 1991 – January 1999



Edited by
HASMY AGAM



INSTITUTE OF DIPLOMACY AND FOREIGN RELATIONS

Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Abdullah Haji Ahmad Badawi / edited by Hasmy Agam.

(Diplomatic profile series : profiles of Malaysia's Foreign Ministers)

Bibliography: p.

ISBN 978-983-2220-16-9

1. Abdullah Haji Ahmad Badawi, Dato' Seri, 1939-. 2. Foreign Ministers--Malaysia. 3. Cabinet officers--Malaysia. 4. Prime ministers--Malaysia.

5. Malaysia--Politics and government. I. Hasmy Agam, 1944-. II. Series. 959.5

Published by

Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations (IDFR)

Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Malaysia

www.idfr.gov.my

info@idfr.gov.my

copyright © 2009 Kuala Lumpur

Acknowledgement

Title page photo from the New Straits Times.

CONTENTS

<i>Foreword</i> by Y.B. Datuk Anifah Aman	v
<i>Editorial Note</i> by Hasmy Agam	vii
<i>Life as Secretary-General during Pak Lah's Tenure, 1991-1996</i> by Ahmad Kamil Jaafar	1
<i>Pak Lah – The Loyal Implementer</i> by Abdul Halim Ali	8
<i>Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and Malaysian Diplomacy</i> by Abdul Kadir Mohamad	13
<i>The Foreign Minister Oversees</i> by Razali Ismail	20
<i>Wisma Putra and Malaysian Diplomacy under Pak Lah</i> by Deva Mohd Ridzam	24
<i>An Overview</i> by Chandran Jeshurun	30



(By courtesy of the New Straits Times)

FOREWORD

I could not have asked for a more welcome and pleasant task than to pen this Foreword to the second publication of the Profiles of Malaysia's Foreign Ministers in the IDFR's Diplomatic Profile Series. It was historically quite refreshing to read the first Profile which was devoted to our first Prime Minister, Al-Marhum Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj, who was also the first Minister of External Affairs (as the portfolio was known then). And now we are being treated to a timely Profile of our recently retired Prime Minister, Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who has the distinction of being the third of our Prime Ministers who had held the portfolio of Minister of Foreign Affairs from 1991 to 1999.

Being new to this Ministry, I am very pleased to find that Wisma Putra and IDFR have persevered in recording our nation's impressive history in the field of international relations since its founding years. The period of Tun Abdullah's tenure at Wisma Putra marked a particularly productive and challenging phase in Prime Minister Tun Dr. Mahathir's proactive leadership of the nation. It is, therefore, most welcome that the events and achievements of that period be reflected in this rather unique and thoughtful manner through the essays of the stalwarts of the Ministry during those days. Their collective accounts of how the nation fared in its foreign relations, especially with regard to the rapid economic development that Malaysia was experiencing at that time, are of much interest at a time when we are once again faced with a major financial crisis of global proportions.

Having the honour of helming the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, I believe that we should be continually working towards upgrading and fine-tuning the diplomatic skills of our own core staff serving both at home and at our many missions overseas. In this undertaking I consider the work of the IDFR to be of fundamental importance both in terms of the extensive training programmes that it maintains as well as in conducting research and publishing its findings for dissemination to the interested public.

Datuk Anifah Aman

Minister of Foreign Affairs

Wisma Putra, Putrajaya

July 2009

EDITORIAL NOTE

The Diplomatic Profile Series was launched by the Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations (IDFR) in November 2008 as an initiative to capture for posterity a glimpse of Malaysia's past Ministers of Foreign Affairs. Following the publication of the profile of Tunku Abdul Rahman, the first Foreign Minister of Malaysia (who was also Prime Minister), we decided, at the suggestion of the then Minister of Foreign Affairs, Datuk Seri Utama Dr. Rais Yatim, to focus for our next diplomatic profile on Dato' Seri (now Tun) Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, our seventh Foreign Minister and fifth Prime Minister, to commemorate his retirement from active politics.

I am grateful to our Foreign Minister, Datuk Anifah Aman, for his Foreword, and to Tan Sri Ahmad Kamil Jaafar, Tan Sri Razali Ismail, Tan Sri Abdul Halim Ali, Tan Sri Abdul Kadir Mohamad and Dato' Deva Mohd Ridzam for their personal glimpses of Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, and to the late Dr. Chandran Jeshurun for his overview of Pak Lah's tenure as Foreign Minister spanning a period of some eight years. While some slight overlap in coverage is unavoidable — indeed, this factor discouraged the editor from making his own contribution, as he had initially intended — each of the contributors, who had served under Pak Lah in one capacity or another, gives an insider's and unique perspective of Pak Lah's character and his role and contributions as the nation's Foreign Minister. They have each captured the essence of Pak Lah's persona: his endearing qualities of affability and camaraderie, humility and equanimity under pressure, and his warm and personal approach towards both his foreign counterparts and his own officials and staff.

In the main, the contributors have focused on the tenure of Pak Lah as Foreign Minister; the one exception being Tan Sri Abdul Kadir Mohamad, who has extended his coverage of Pak Lah beyond his role as Foreign Minister on the persuasive rationale that as Prime Minister he continued to have a significant impact on Malaysia's foreign policy. Clearly, both as Foreign Minister and Prime Minister, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi had made his own unique contributions to the country's foreign policy and diplomacy, particularly in their effective execution in very challenging times, characterised by the end of the Cold War and the uncertainties it presented.

While IDFR is delighted to be able to publish this Profile of Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, it must be clearly understood that it is no way responsible for the views and opinions of the authors.

This Profile was intended for publication much earlier but for a number of reasons it is only possible to have it published now, a week after the sad passing away of the late Dr. Chandran Jeshurun, to whom I would like to pay the highest tribute for his assistance in the preparation of this volume, and the Diplomatic Profile Series as a whole.

Hasmy Agam

November 2009

LIFE AS SECRETARY-GENERAL DURING PAK LAH'S TENURE, 1991-1996

Ahmad Kamil Jaafar

It was on an official visit to Jakarta in late 1990 that the Prime Minister, Tun Dr. Mahathir, mentioned to me privately that he was planning a Cabinet reshuffle soon which would affect Wisma Putra. He had basically decided to appoint the incumbent Foreign Minister, Dato' Abu Hassan Omar, to the Menteri Besar's post in Selangor and Pak Lah as his successor. Upon returning to Kuala Lumpur I shared this privileged information with the senior staff of Wisma Putra. The Cabinet reshuffle was officially announced on 9 February 1991, and the formal handing over of duties by Abu Hassan to Pak Lah took place at Wisma Putra on 15 March, after he had been sworn in as a Cabinet Minister.

The announcement of Pak Lah being our new Foreign Minister was immediately welcomed and seen as the formal return to high political office of a "prodigal son". The reaction in Wisma Putra was certainly equally positive and, understandably so, as many of us among the senior members of the Ministry had been acquainted with Pak Lah since our days as undergraduates at the University of Malaya. For me personally, I felt honoured to serve under him as we had both, once upon a time, attended the same school, High School Bukit Mertajam; he from his home in Kepala Batas and I from mine in Kulim, Kedah.

I recalled then that I had met Pak Lah in Tokyo over lunch when he was still in his political wilderness. He was interested in learning about our bilateral relations with Japan. I later met him again at the Royal Selangor Golf Club after the 1989 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Kuala Lumpur. He said that he had been following the meeting and was proud that we had acquitted ourselves well. This clearly showed his keen interest in the management of our foreign policy. Since Dr. Mahathir took office as Prime Minister in 1981, Wisma Putra had been exposed, for almost a decade at that time, to his dynamic and no-nonsense style in formulating and executing Malaysian foreign policy.

It was, thus, clearly understood that whoever was to serve as Malaysian Foreign Minister at the fast-moving pace of international affairs in the post-Cold War years would have to be quick in comprehending and implementing our foreign policy goals. I am proud to be able to say that as senior officers at the Ministry we had all sought to maintain the highest standards of diplomatic skills and knew how to provide in-depth and meaningful professional advice to our political leaders, as our illustrious predecessors had so successfully done since 1957. In a sense, it can be truly said that the top echelon of Wisma Putra by the early 1990s comprised a committed band of men and women who would now support Pak Lah as head of Wisma Putra.

It was, of course, my primary duty to ensure that the Minister would be kept fully informed of the work of Wisma Putra, and that its organisational structure, which was still undergoing some fine-tuning, would be a dependable prop to his leadership. I felt special respect for Pak Lah for standing by his chief lieutenants at the Ministry steadfastly, and at no time nor in any way allowing the operating system in the Ministry to be compromised. Particularly as the Secretary-General of the Ministry, I could not have ensured the best performance of its support staff without the

constant and indispensable backing of the Minister. In this I was indeed fortunate for having had Pak Lah as my Minister.

Malaysian foreign policy had by 1991 been quite vigorously engaging countries such as China and France in its various multilateral initiatives. It was no surprise, therefore, that already in March of that year the new Minister had to play host to high-ranking visiting delegations from both those countries as well as receive senior Vietnamese Government officials. In accordance with our diplomatic tradition and etiquette, the first courtesy call on the new Foreign Minister was paid jointly by the ASEAN Ambassadors and High Commissioners, and Pak Lah took this event in his stride with his disarming charm and politeness, qualities which won friendship and admiration from the ASEAN senior officials. From April onwards he embarked on his regional familiarisation visits, calling at Jakarta and Singapore first. Neither of these visits seemed to pose any unusual challenges to his casual but serious style of interacting with foreign leaders. Our confidence in the new Minister can be said to have been boosted tremendously by this very natural and untroubled transition in serving with him.

Malaysia was at this time Chairman of the 24th ASEAN Standing Committee which inevitably meant that the Foreign Minister had to handle a fair number of ASEAN-related diplomatic tasks such as visiting Japan and South Korea. However, it was the Prime Minister's push for closer ties with the South that took Pak Lah on an extended tour of Chile, Brazil and Argentina in June-July 1991. It was apparent to those of us who worked closely with him that Dr. Mahathir's visions of vastly increasing economic and trade relations with these countries were something of a revelation for Pak Lah who had not been exposed to this aspect of Malaysian foreign policy before his helming of Wisma Putra.

This was the time when South-South cooperation was being promoted at a heightened tempo and when the Group of 15

developing nations (G15) was established in 1989. As the delegations that accompanied the Prime Minister on these missions included other senior Cabinet colleagues as well as leading private sector figures, the Foreign Minister relied heavily on his Wisma Putra officials to keep him adequately briefed about the somewhat complex financial details in the economic dimensions of our foreign policy. This was his “baptism of fire”. He later confided that it was hugely different viewing Wisma Putra from the inside than viewing it from the outside. I suspected, indeed to his credit, that he had begun to take full grasp of the nuances in the implementation of our foreign policy.

Despite the fast pace at which the Foreign Minister had to play “catching up” with the ever-increasing responsibilities of Wisma Putra, Pak Lah was well-prepared by the middle of the year to take on the 24th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in Kuala Lumpur and then move on to the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) meeting in Istanbul and to the NAM (Non-Aligned Movement) Foreign Ministers’ Conference in Accra. At home, he had the opportunity of meeting all our Heads of Mission during their Conference in Kuala Lumpur in August 1991 when the Prime Minister also launched the Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations which, for some time, Wisma Putra had been pressing for as a training and research wing of the Ministry.

In the effort to widen our links with the Latin American countries, the Foreign Minister again had to accompany Dr. Mahathir when the latter paid his first visit to Mexico and then later to Venezuela for the G-15 Summit, while in October there was the CHOGM in Harare, Zimbabwe. And then, as is the practice, the Foreign Minister was tied down in New York once the UN General Assembly began in the latter part of the year. This was to be his first experience in the conduct of multilateral diplomacy. Our job at Wisma Putra was to ensure that he was at all times fully backed up by our best officers during all these overseas visits and at the UN we had Razali

Ismail, another University of Malaya contemporary, to guide Pak Lah through the “ropes”.

Malaysia’s foreign policy continued to be increasingly complex during the early 1990s, and among the critical decisions that the Prime Minister had made was to intervene in the problems in Bosnia, Somalia and Sudan, all of which tested our resources at the Ministry to the limit. Despite support and encouragement from Pak Lah, I have to admit that our efforts to bring some form of reconciliation between the Sudanese Government and the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement (SPLM) did not lead to any success in the end. On the other hand, as the former Yugoslavia began to unravel in 1992, Malaysia had quickly moved to recognise the new states of Croatia, Slovenia and Bosnia-Herzegovina in May 1992 while diplomatic relations with Belgrade were formally severed in September.

Here, I am happy to record the invaluable role of his late wife, Datin Seri Endon Mahmood, in providing much welcomed support for Pak Lah as Foreign Minister. Thus, it was Endon who was at hand when the Foreign Minister of Bosnia, Dr. Haris Silajdzic, visited Kuala Lumpur in December 1992 to receive donations for relief work that had been collected by her team of helpers. I have also personally observed the whole-hearted and dedicated commitment that Endon gave to the Wisma Putra wives’ Association, *Perwakilan*, so much so that the entire Ministry shared a sort of “family” spirit. In retrospect, one cannot help but feel that her constant presence by his side, abroad during their travels together as well as at home, played no small part in smoothening and moderating Pak Lah’s dealings with his officers.

Back to the Balkans, we took special pride in having succeeded at the Ministerial Meeting in Geneva of the OIC Contact Group in calling for the first-ever joint meeting of the Foreign Ministers, Defence Ministers and Defence Chiefs of the OIC Contact Group

on Bosnia. Our strong involvement at the international level over the Balkan issue reached its peak when we succeeded, at the Jakarta NAM Summit in September 1992, to have Yugoslavia, a founding member, suspended from NAM. More importantly, Prime Minister Mahathir took the initiative to send Pak Lah to Jakarta in 1993 to convey, among other matters, Malaysia's views on the Balkan situation. Pak Lah also raised the situation in the Balkans with US Deputy Secretary of State, Dr. Clifton Wharton, when the latter called at Wisma Putra on 23 June 1993. Related to this, Pak Lah gave his blessing and support to Malaysia's candidature in the person of L.C. Vohrah, one of our High Court Judges, to the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia at The Hague in September of that year.

Nearer home there were important issues that needed to be looked at and addressed, not least being the bilateral negotiations between Malaysia and Indonesia on Sipadan and Ligitan islands and between Malaysia and Singapore on Pulau Batu Puteh. While these issues have now been resolved and put behind us, including the agreement between Malaysia and Vietnam to jointly explore and exploit the marine resources in the area of our overlapping claims in the South China Sea, others continue to defy early resolution. It was also a period that not only saw the restructuring of the ASEAN secretariat that led to the appointment of our own man, Ajit Singh, as the first ever full-time ASEAN Secretary-General but also expanded and heightened ASEAN activities.

I must acknowledge the role played by the Foreign Minister in all these discussions and negotiations. Wisma Putra's contributions during those years of the Mahathir Administration were, in one way or another, greatly helped by its Foreign Minister being someone who readily accepted the reality of a proactive Prime Minister and his fast-paced diplomacy. Indeed, I can say with confidence that I cannot recall any serious diplomatic *faux pas* on our part during those days when we dealt with many difficult and

complex issues at the bilateral, regional and international levels. The credit for much of this lies with Pak Lah for having enabled us, the professionals, to move freely on the foreign front at the behest of the Prime Minister. My friendship of many years with him and our respect for each other were mutually reinforcing in the performance of our respective duties and in managing Malaysia's foreign policy.

He began and he accomplished. *Aut coepisse noli aut confice!*

Tan Sri Ahmad Kamil Jaafar joined the Diplomatic Service in 1962 and served in Thailand, Federal Republic of Germany and Singapore before returning to Wisma Putra as Director-General of ASEAN in 1970. He was then appointed Deputy Permanent Representative at the United Nations in New York in 1973 before taking up the post of Minister-Counsellor at the Malaysian Embassy in Bangkok in 1975. He was next made Ambassador to Vietnam (1978-1980), to Switzerland and Permanent Representative to the UN Offices in Geneva (1980-1983), to China (1983-1986) and Japan (1986-1989). He succeeded as Secretary-General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1989 and, on his retirement in 1995, was made Special Envoy to the Prime Minister until the present.

PAK LAH — THE LOYAL IMPLEMENTER

Abdul Halim Ali

Dato' Seri Abdullah's appointment as the Foreign Minister of Malaysia almost coincided with my return to Wisma Putra from Vienna to serve as Deputy Secretary-General I in February 1991. There was an air of excitement that someone who had been dropped from the Cabinet four years earlier was being brought back into the Government to take charge of the Foreign Ministry. Many of us career officers at the Ministry took it to be a sign that he had been forgiven by the Prime Minister of the day, Tun Dr. Mahathir, for whatever "wrong" he had done and was ready to trust Pak Lah with such an important post. Whatever was in the Prime Minister's mind when he brought back Pak Lah into the Cabinet, we in Wisma Putra rejoiced on hearing the news as many of us knew Pak Lah quite well when he had been in the Civil Service. We knew that he was friendly, approachable, and easy to get along with and, given his understanding of how the Civil Service works, he would be a good boss to serve under.

We were not disappointed, of course. In spite of the numerous meetings and steady string of visitors, he always made time available to us for briefings and consultation on the latest developments around the world which were of interest to Malaysia as well as to discuss follow-up actions pursuant to Cabinet decisions or instructions from the Prime Minister. If a meeting during normal office hours was not possible, we would be invited to see him in

the evening at his house, which was only a few minutes away from Wisma Putra. And if the issues that needed to be discussed were very pressing, we would be asked to ride with him in his car and go over the issues as the car took him to his intended destination, usually to the Prime Minister's Department, the airport or the Parliament.

His knack for endearing himself to officers made life in Wisma Putra less stressful at a time when there was so much pressure on the Ministry to deliver on what the Government wanted. After all, Pak Lah's tenure as Foreign Minister from 1991 to 1999, stretched over a period of dramatic developments in international politics — the break-up of the Soviet Union, the Gulf War, the end of apartheid in South Africa, the rise of China as an economic power, the break-up of Yugoslavia, just to name a few — all of which offered tremendous challenges as well as opportunities for the international community.

Tun Dr. Mahathir, the real architect of Malaysia's foreign policy during his Premiership, clearly saw in these events an opportunity to assert even more forcefully his vision of a more equitable world order which would seriously address the concerns of developing countries. These involved particularly the problems of underdevelopment, poverty, US unilateralism on important matters of peace and security and the lack of democracy and transparency in the decision-making process in the United Nations, especially at the Security Council. Forging closer relations with developing countries, both on a bilateral basis as well as in the context of the OIC, the Non-Aligned Movement and the G77 became more pronounced than ever before as Mahathir firmly believed in the benefits of closer South-South cooperation. It was during this period that the then Prime Minister undertook major visits, accompanied by large business delegations, to the countries of Latin America, Africa and the newly independent states of the former Soviet Union.

At the regional level, Malaysia's advocacy for more tangible and substantive ASEAN cooperation and its central role in APEC became more strident and at times controversial. Mahathir's active and direct involvement in Malaysia's foreign policy and the strong stand he took on many issues kept the Foreign Ministry on its toes virtually 365 days a year. Needless to say, such a high profile role in international diplomacy imposed on Wisma Putra additional responsibilities and enormous pressure to deliver on the commitments made. During this period, hardly a week passed by without a high level visit to or from Malaysia that Wisma Putra had to manage, not to mention the scheduled meetings and conferences that it had to participate in.

In all this, Pak Lah's role was crucial. Being in charge of the Foreign Ministry, he had his hands full, both as a participant in the visits and conferences and as an advisor to Wisma Putra officers who had to prepare the groundwork for the success of those activities. He was fortunate to have good and capable officers, led by Tan Sri Kamil Jaafar, to rely on at the time. As a member of the Cabinet, Pak Lah was in the best position to advise officers on the thinking of the Cabinet or the Prime Minister on specific issues impacting on foreign policy. Such advice would then be taken into account in the preparation of Wisma Putra's briefs and position papers and draft speeches for the Prime Minister. Because of his openness and willingness to share information with officers, post-Cabinet meetings between the Foreign Minister and senior officers of the Ministry were eagerly awaited events at Wisma Putra.

Apart from conveying the Cabinet decisions relevant to the Ministry, Pak Lah would also allow open discussions on other issues relating to foreign policy. Officers were assured of a lively discussion at every post-Cabinet meeting chaired by Pak Lah, something that apparently ended after he left the Foreign Ministry. In allowing such free discussions to take place, Pak Lah had contributed so much to the development of critical thinking

among officers at the time and to the development of their confidence to argue out Malaysia's case in international conferences. To cap it all, Pak Lah also allowed his senior officers to meet the Press and brief them on specific issues on foreign policy and to take questions. Such an exposure provided very valuable experience to senior officers and gave them the confidence to face the Press, both local and foreign in the course of their work.

Effective foreign policy implementation requires very close consultation and coordination between the Foreign Ministry and other Ministries and agencies of the Government, especially those related to economic planning, trade and industry, defence and security as well as labour and education. This was not an easy task even at the best of times as Ministers always have their own priorities which sometimes did not jive with the priorities of the Foreign Ministry. For Pak Lah especially, having to deal with one particular Cabinet colleague must have been very difficult as the Minister concerned could not accept a coordinating role from the Foreign Ministry. This particular Minister would even make an issue out of the fact that Pak Lah as Foreign Minister was given higher precedence, protocol-wise, by foreign Governments during official visits led by the Prime Minister. It was a measure of Pak Lah's graciousness and magnanimity that never for a moment had he shown any open hostility to the colleague in question and went about his job as best as he could.

Having had the opportunity of accompanying Pak Lah on many of his official missions overseas, I was struck by the ease with which he befriended and established close friendship with delegates from different countries, especially those from developing countries. His late wife, Datin Endon, who was usually with him on these missions, complemented Pak Lah's diplomatic role beautifully, winning friends and respect for Malaysia through her charm and friendly disposition. Pak Lah was a very popular figure in ASEAN, the OIC and the Non-Aligned Movement. Because of Malaysia's

high-profile role in international affairs during Tun Dr. Mahathir's time, the Malaysian Foreign Minister was certainly a much sought after personality for consultations and exchange of views by his counterparts and other leaders from the developing nations.

Serving as Foreign Minister at the best of times was challenging enough but to assume that position at a time of dramatic changes affecting the global community and to challenge entrenched positions of the rich and powerful nations, must have been very daunting for Pak Lah. Knowing Pak Lah, it is hard to imagine that he relished the tough stands taken by the Prime Minister on several issues. Notwithstanding the pressure that he must have felt, he slogged on, taking those controversies in his stride. He was truly a loyal implementer of Malaysia's foreign policy.

Tan Sri Abdul Halim Ali joined the Ministry of Foreign Affairs after graduating from the University of Malaya in 1966. He served in India, Indonesia, Japan and New York between 1968 and 1982 before being appointed as Ambassador to Vietnam. From 1985 to 1989 he was the Deputy Secretary-General III at the Foreign Ministry and, thereafter, was appointed as Ambassador to Austria and concurrently as Malaysia's Resident Representative to IAEA and UNIDF in Vienna. He returned to Malaysia in 1992 to assume the post of Deputy Secretary-General I (Political Affairs). After a short stint as the Secretary-General of the Foreign Ministry, he was appointed as the Chief Secretary to the Government in September 1997, a post he held until his retirement from Government service in 2001.

ABDULLAH AHMAD BADAWI AND MALAYSIAN DIPLOMACY

Abdul Kadir Mohamad

“Work with me, not for me” was Abdullah Ahmad Badawi’s memorable quote upon assuming office as Prime Minister of Malaysia on 31 October 2003. In my own case, I would gladly admit that I *worked for him* for quite a long while, that is even before he became Prime Minister of Malaysia. I first met Abdullah in person in 1988 when he visited Pakistan to attend a meeting of the Governing Board of the International Islamic University of Islamabad, as an international member of the Board. I was then High Commissioner of Malaysia to Pakistan.

I did not meet him again until he became Minister of Foreign Affairs in 1991. But it was an unforgettable start. Hardly a month in office as Foreign Minister, and he had to chair the Annual ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in May of that year. As Director-General of the Department of Policy Planning in the Foreign Ministry, I was directed to “assist” the new Minister of Foreign Affairs as he was not yet familiar with ASEAN subjects and procedures. In the early 1990s, the problems of regional peace and security dominated the discussions in ASEAN forums, and Policy Planning was the “desk” responsible for such matters in Wisma Putra.

The 1991 ASEAN Ministerial Meeting was no ordinary meeting of ASEAN. For the first time since the formation of ASEAN in 1967,

the Foreign Ministers of China and Russia were present, as guests of the Government of Malaysia. It was a diplomatic breakthrough no doubt, and Malaysia had led the way. ASEAN had been created to provide a safety net for peace in the region — after the Indonesia-Malaysia Confrontation of 1962-66, the Malaysia-Philippines break of diplomatic relations in 1963, the Malaysia-Singapore separation of 1965 — and to serve as a bulwark against the advance of communism into Southeast Asia.

It was a credit to ASEAN's foresight and progressive thinking that it seized the earliest available opportunity to extend the hand of friendship to communist China and formerly communist Russia following the collapse of the Soviet system and the ending of the Cold War in 1990. The Foreign Ministers of ASEAN needed to chart its course in the new peace and security environment, and the challenges of the post-Cold War period. At the top of the agenda was the question of maintaining the relevance of ASEAN. There was general agreement that Southeast Asian unity and stability would be best secured by expanding ASEAN to include the rest of Southeast Asia (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam) as members of the organisation, but this was not to be achieved until much later in the decade.

Meanwhile in Europe, the collapse of the Soviet Union led to the break-up of Yugoslavia and the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina followed. Malaysia took a leading role in highlighting the atrocities that were being committed by the Serbs against the Bosnians. In 1995, by a stroke of ingenuity, intended more as a public relations exercise than an actual council for war, Malaysia took the unprecedented step — never repeated in the history of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) — of calling for and hosting a joint meeting of the Foreign and Defence Ministers of the OIC countries. Abdullah chaired that meeting which ended with the creation of the Bosnia-Herzegovina Assistance Mobilisation Group.

Secretary-General Ahmad Kamil Jaafar was the principal executor of Project Bosnia. We consulted former Foreign Minister (Tun) Ghazali Shafie and he, too, liked the idea, which he would call “operation scare-crow”! As it turned out, the gambit worked. After the Kuala Lumpur conference, many countries started to sympathise with the plight of the Bosnian Muslims and began to provide more assistance to this group which was the underdog in the three-cornered Bosnian conflict. The rest of the story, as they say, is history.

By 1996, Abdullah had been Foreign Minister for five years. On my part, I progressed from being Director-General of Policy Planning to the position of Secretary-General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and he became my immediate boss. I did spend a short stint as the Deputy Secretary-General I (17 days to be exact) before assuming the highest executive post in the Ministry. In 1997, Asian countries were faced with the Asian Financial Crisis. In December of that year, for the first time, the Heads of State/Government of ASEAN countries and the leaders of China, Japan and the Republic of Korea met in an informal summit meeting. Again, Malaysia took the lead in lobbying for and hosting the first in this series of informal summits — another breakthrough in regional diplomacy and cooperation. In response to the pleas made by the ASEAN leaders, China kept its word and did not revalue its currency. The Chinese stand helped ASEAN countries stave off the worst effects of the Asian Financial Crisis.

Over the years, Abdullah would repeat, again and again, that the Chinese action or non-action (if you like) regarding their *renminbi* was an example of genuine regionalism. He would always recall the events of 1997 as a fine example of Asian solidarity at work and of the value of true friendship between regional countries. He considers the 1997 accomplishments as one of the most gratifying episodes during his tenure as Foreign Minister of Malaysia.

Under his watch as Foreign Minister, Abdullah also played an important part in diffusing many tense moments between Malaysia and Indonesia caused by the dispute over the ownership of Pulau Ligitan and Pulau Sipadan; and with Singapore over Batu Puteh, Middle Rocks and South Ledge. Both sets of disputes were peacefully resolved through adjudication by the International Court of Justice in 2002 and 2008 respectively. Although such disputes did put strains on bilateral relations, Malaysia never wavered in its quest to make ASEAN stronger, consistent with its firm belief in the policy of inclusiveness and the benefits of regional unity and stability. For example, Malaysia was the leading advocate of the inclusion of the remaining four Southeast Asian countries in ASEAN. ASEAN-10 was finally accomplished with the admission of Vietnam in 1995, Laos and Myanmar in 1997 and Cambodia in April 1999.

Abdullah had left the Foreign Ministry in January 1999 to become the Minister of Home Affairs cum Deputy Prime Minister. I remained in touch with him because he continued to be interested in international issues, especially the Middle East and ASEAN matters. When he assumed the office of Prime Minister of Malaysia on 31 October 2003, I went to work for him once again, at the Office of the Prime Minister, as his Adviser for Foreign Affairs. In his book, *Malaysia: Fifty Years of Diplomacy, 1957-2007*, author Chandran Jeshurun had this thesis that the leaders of Malaysia, that is to say the Prime Minister of the day, had always influenced the direction and conduct of Malaysian foreign policy throughout the decades. It was no different in the case of Abdullah.

The opening to China by ASEAN in 1991 had led to the establishment and nurturing of the ASEAN Plus Three (APT) process which enabled China, Japan and the Republic of Korea to be strategically engaged, both politically and economically, with ASEAN. Malaysia had always been in the forefront of this scheme for East Asia cooperation ever since former Prime Minister (Tun) Dr. Mahathir Mohamad had proposed the creation of an “East Asia

Economic Grouping” which later metamorphosed into an “East Asia Economic Caucus” — the forerunners of the APT process.

As Prime Minister, Abdullah advanced the discussion on East Asia community building by proposing the transformation of the annual APT Summit Meeting into an East Asia Summit. However, a compromise had to be struck regarding the membership of the Summit. As a result, when the First East Asia Summit meeting took place in Kuala Lumpur on 14 December 2005, not only were the leaders of APT present but also those of Australia, India and New Zealand.

Abdullah’s premiership also coincided with Malaysia’s chairmanship of the NAM and the OIC. Malaysia achieved several firsts in the context of cooperation among NAM countries. These include the setting up of the NAM News Network and the NAM Ministerial Meeting on the Advancement of Women. In the OIC, Abdullah worked hard to put what he called “an economic face” to the Organization which had always been preoccupied only with international political and security issues. His main legacy in the Organization is the Capacity Building Programme for OIC Countries. He conceived it as a self-help programme, where one OIC member country would provide expertise to set up socio-economic projects in another OIC member country, supported by funding from the Islamic Development Bank. He was especially keen to do something for the poor and helpless in the Muslim world. For example, he appointed former Ambassador Syed Ariff Fadzillah as a Special Envoy and approved special funds to provide direct assistance to the internally displaced persons, victims of the violence in the Darfur region of Sudan.

The problem of Palestine and the plight of its people had always been very close to Abdullah’s heart. As Foreign Minister, this was one subject which he never failed to raise with his counterparts in every part of the world. It was no surprise that, as Prime Minister, he decided to exert his personal best efforts to bringing

an end to the Israeli bombardment of Gaza in December 2008. Abdullah wrote to the President of the United Nations General Assembly to request him to convene an Emergency Special Session of the UNGA under the “Uniting for Peace” Resolution. He also wrote to the Secretary General of the United Nations, the Pope, President-elect Barack Obama and other world figures as well as the Heads of State/Government of all the OIC countries and all the NAM countries. He summoned to his office all the Heads of Mission of the current members of the United Nations Security Council based in Kuala Lumpur, to personally deliver copies of the letters he had addressed to their respective Heads. Abdullah requested the Malaysian Parliament to meet in a Special Session which, in an unprecedented display of bipartisan unity, passed the necessary resolution containing the same demand. This resolution was subsequently conveyed to other Parliaments in the world. The Special Session of the UNGA was finally convened in New York on 15 January 2009. The President duly acknowledged Malaysia as a country which had showed willingness to stand up for the Palestinian people and as the country which had led the lobby for the convening of the Emergency Special Session to debate the question of Gaza. In this particular exercise, Abdullah wrote 163 letters and he was very pleased, in the end, that Malaysia’s efforts were not in vain. I do not think any Malaysian Prime Minister had ever written so many letters to so many people on a single issue such as this one.

Abdullah visited many countries in his capacity as Prime Minister. His official or working visits to other countries included, almost always, business delegations. He would address forums, specially organised by the Malaysian Industrial Development Authority (MIDA) and Malaysia External Trade Development Corporation (MATRADE), to promote trade and investment relations between Malaysia and the countries being visited. I believe the records would show that he brought more business for the country and he made more friends for Malaysia during his five years as Prime Minister than he did during his eight years as Foreign Minister.

Sadly however, Abdullah's greatest contribution to Malaysian diplomacy is not known in the country. This pertains to the success he achieved in presenting Malaysia as an enlightened Muslim nation firmly rooted upon good governance based on the approach of Islam Hadhari. During his five years as Prime Minister, Abdullah took every opportunity he had at various international conferences and meetings with other world leaders to explain how Malaysia has adopted Islam Hadhari as the country's guide for just management and fair administration. He implanted in the minds of his audience the image of a dynamic Muslim country, committed to the progress and development of all Malaysians, regardless of their religion or their race. The international audience liked his message that the religion of Islam is not inconsistent with modernisation, that Islam certainly does not enjoin Muslims to turn their backs against the rest of the world. In the midst of the grave misconceptions about Islam and Muslims in many parts of the globe especially in the West, Abdullah showcased Malaysia as a model Muslim country, at peace with itself and the rest of the world. In the process, he succeeded in putting Malaysia into the good books of the countries that are important to us. Yet, this legacy of his may simply dissipate over time for lack of follow-through as there is no awareness or appreciation, in his own country, about this important contribution of his to Malaysia's history of international diplomacy.

Tan Sri Abdul Kadir Mohamad joined the Malaysian Foreign Service in 1968. He served in various capacities in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and in Malaysian diplomatic missions in New York, Saigon, Brussels, Washington and Islamabad. He was Secretary-General of the Ministry from 1996 to 2001. After that, he was appointed Ambassador-at-Large from 2001 to 2003, including eight months as Senior Adviser to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in East Timor under the sponsorship of the UNDP. During Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's premiership (2003-2009), he worked in the Office of the Prime Minister as Adviser for Foreign Affairs to the Prime Minister of Malaysia.

THE FOREIGN MINISTER OVERSEES

Razali Ismail

It must have been daunting for Dato' Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi or Pak Lah as he is affectionately known, to be Foreign Minister under a power-house Prime Minister like Dr. Mahathir. The latter was at the full tide of his international activism against the backdrop of the first Iraq War ("Desert Storm"), the tragedies of Bosnia, the Palestinian struggle for nationhood and the Rio Summit on Environment and Sustainability. And to back all these diplomatic campaigns was a Malaysian team at the UN that had been catapulted raw into making fateful decisions at the General Assembly, Security Council, G77 and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) levels.

That Pak Lah lasted the course for eight long years and ended up being chosen by Dr. Mahathir as his Deputy Prime Minister and successor has much to say for his management skills and consistency of purpose as Foreign Minister. It could not have been easy to translate the demands and "injunctions" of the Prime Minister based on his fiery "perspectives" of the globe of an earlier age and the almost evangelistic urge to expunge the world of its iniquities. But, by and large, the job was discharged well enough, through the combination of the dedicated efforts of the Foreign Minister and the extraordinary skills of a collection of practitioners at Wisma Putra and abroad who were fully partial towards their Foreign Minister while overwhelmed by the Prime Minister. At Wisma Putra, it was the watch of Ahmad Kamil Jaafar who threaded skillfully between the Prime Minister and the Foreign Minister.

As I understood it, looking at events at home from New York, while there were quite specific decisions from the Prime Minister and Cabinet which at times placed the practitioners in a quizzical situation, the job was always done in the best traditions of the Ministry. Much has to be said about the Foreign Minister having to deal one on one with the Prime Minister and in Cabinet and, then, in effecting a rational methodology to his officers at the Ministry to galvanise them into action. Similarly, in New York and other missions, Pak Lah had this ability to rally us around to deal with the responsibilities at hand without recourse to nationalistic jingoism. Pak Lah respected and relied on the expertise of his officers and did not ever act schoolmasterish or needed to underline that he knew it all. To all of us it would be inconceivable to let down Pak Lah and his wonderful, ever-caring late wife Datin Seri Endon.

The UN is a forum that has the verisimilitudes of a market place with purveyors of knowledge, influence makers, and a congregation of followers where information and even positions can be “bought and sold”, favours done and favours returned. One can speculate how Representatives voted, strictly as per the instructions of their Governments or that their votes sometimes were swayed by favours they owed and the persuasions of friends, or worse, enticed by materialistic gains from certain countries. Pak Lah as Foreign Minister understood the terrain and we were never party to such deals. The UN during the General Assembly debates belongs to the Foreign Ministers and their phalanx of delegates in town, staying for as long as three months.

At the UN, Pak Lah was totally at ease in the company of his peers, the other Foreign Ministers that included the ASEAN circle and friends from earlier associations, the Non-Aligned countries, the Europeans and the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC). He “worked” the senior officers of other delegations and was a peripatetic person at all meetings. I felt totally inept seeing

the Foreign Minister in his element shaking hands warmly and with such sincerity, real or apparent, with me paling in comparison to a natural-born diplomat. Looking back it is clear that Pak Lah made us understand how much he relied on the expertise and dexterity of the practitioners rather than his own personal qualities. There was never any question as to who was right and whose arguments would win the day. Wisma Putra cannot be run in a vertical fashion with the Minister at the head of the heap, silencing contrarian views. Even when Dr. Mahathir was in New York, as the champion of the South, an iconoclastic leader, with a huge following at the UN, Pak Lah as the Foreign Minister made no attempt to insist on being the bridge to the Prime Minister, truly allowing us to deal directly with the Prime Minister.

The years of activism during the time of Pak Lah as Foreign Minister propelled Malaysia into heated debates at the Security Council. We agonised over decisions to be made, not in the name of Malaysia, but as a responsible member of the Security Council, dysfunctional as it is. This was the case in authorising the use of force under Article 7 to evict Saddam Hussein out of Kuwait; the Prime Minister was tormented. Equally, he was angry over the massacres by the Serbs in Bosnia-Herzegovina and he utilised hidden means to help the Bosnians. It was while we were in the throes of these issues that Pak Lah became the Foreign Minister. We fought “pitched battles” with the US delegation to bring into legitimacy the formal name of Palestine and, through the General Assembly, we successfully brought a petition to the International Court of Justice on the illegality of the use of nuclear weapons. At the same time, the Foreign Minister was beset by the problem of having to deal with the Special Rapporteur of the United Nations on the Independence of Judges and Lawyers, a Malaysian, attempting to balance the Government’s own position and its obligation under the Charter.

Then, in 1992 at the Rio “Earth Summit”, with success and failure in the balance, it was the last important opportunity for developing countries to gain material assistance if poverty and desperation and the world’s environment, were not to be wiped out, perishing in a contaminated pond, small frogs as well as big frogs! Pak Lah and the Malaysian delegation were in the thick of things with Malaysia being exposed for over-logging via satellite pictures put out by NGOs and the supporters of my misunderstood, misguided Swiss friend Bruno Manser. The Foreign Minister and his team participated in charting out the “Forest Principles on Sustainable Practice”, a watershed document. The Commission on Sustainable Development was one of the meagre albeit important results of Rio, and Malaysia was the first Chair.

Among our other “preoccupations” was the quixotic attempt, supported by Pak Lah, to change the UN through reform of the Security Council. My intellectual vanity (and naiveté) convinced the Minister and Wisma Putra of the challenge facing us and the year 1996/1997 resounded with desperate debates in the General Assembly that were quite unprecedented. Our activism took us into every issue and debate virtually on all aspects critical to the UN — development, human rights, sustainability and the power equation that have long stifled the UN. I believe that while the Prime Minister closely checked out our progress, the Foreign Minister counselled and guided us, and we as the practitioners did not let the side down. So, my many thanks to the then Foreign Minister.

Tan Sri Razali Ismail joined the Diplomatic Service after graduating from the University of Malaya and served in India, Paris, London and Vientiane before being appointed Ambassador to Poland in 1978 and High Commissioner to India in 1982. After a short stint as Deputy Secretary-General I at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, he went on to be Malaysia’s longest-serving Permanent Representative at the United Nations from 1988 to 1998. He was Chairman of the UN Security Council and President of the UN General Assembly in 1996. He was also the UN Secretary General’s Special Envoy to Myanmar from 2000 to 2005.

WISMA PUTRA AND MALAYSIAN DIPLOMACY UNDER PAK LAH

Deva Mohd Ridzam

By the time Pak Lah took the stewardship of Wisma Putra, I had already served five of our previous Foreign Ministers and went on to work for yet one other. Pak Lah came to the post as Foreign Minister with a reputation as an even-handed person and a flair for the popular touch. Virtually from the word go, he won the hearts of the Ministry's officers and they, in turn, were quick to appreciate his qualities: "unpompous", approachable, ingrained good manners and warm-hearted. There was always an essential modesty, humanity and humility about him too. If he has a failing it is that he always sees the best in people, as he is hardly able to think ill of others.

He, having once been a civil servant himself, as Foreign Minister, remained a good "net worker", getting what he wanted by "working the system", ringing up officers directly regardless of their rank. Like "King Ghaz" (Tun Muhammad Ghazali Shafie, Permanent Secretary of the Ministry during the Tunku's days), Malaysia's foreign policy Guru, Pak Lah expected officers, even Desk Officers, to constantly monitor developments under their purview. More importantly, he assumed the post with the right attitude — to listen and learn, not lecture. He was respectful of the fact that other points of view have their place. He did not live in a world of black and white. He was always measured and not rushed, unifying

rather than confrontational. In terms of foreign policy, his basic belief was one of stability and continuity while moving forward.

Even before taking up the post, he paid a courtesy call on the aforesaid “King Ghaz”. Many still vividly recall his farewell speech as Foreign Minister in 1999. Pak Lah highlighted what the Tun had told him when, upon assuming the post in 1991, he had sought the latter’s advice on foreign policy formulation and the conduct of diplomacy. Pak Lah received just a one-liner: “It has to be credible”, said the Tun. And Pak Lah has remained true to that advice throughout his stewardship of Wisma Putra. This, among others, explains, in a nutshell, why Pak Lah was a successful Foreign Minister.

He did well also because he was seldom influenced by outside quarters as he had complete trust and confidence in his team of Wisma Putra professionals. He was never meddling and intervened rarely but effectively. This produced an extraordinary situation with officers who, in turn, were fully behind him. Such mutual respect allowed for the free and friendly interplay of ideas in the formulation of policy. Pak Lah was also particularly fortunate in that Wisma Putra then had a well-defined organisational structure and machinery backed up by a core of experienced and dedicated officers — a team that produced coherence and effectiveness in terms of foreign policy delivery, enabling the Ministry to punch above its weight.

Indeed, the combination of a good leader and a core of able officers once again made the Foreign Ministry accessible and relevant to critics who, over the past years, had come to find it somewhat distant. With such a combination, Pak Lah and the professionals were not only always up to speed, but were also able to keep their poise and composure. This, despite the pressures of domestic and global politics, not to mention, the fiery assertions, if not stridency, of Prime Minister Dato’ Seri (now Tun) Dr. Mahathir Mohamad on certain international issues.

Pak Lah to a large extent was a man in the right place at the right time. Domestically, the rift within UMNO needed to be repaired and there was also a need to project a more friendly face abroad. He was, indeed, a reassuring figure at moments of tension at home and abroad about Malaysia. In other words, Pak Lah's gentle firmness was useful in dealing with conflicting interests at home and perceptions about Malaysia overseas. To assess the man and his contributions to Malaysian foreign policy and diplomacy, one has also to understand the global context that existed at about the time he took office as the Number One diplomat of the country.

It was a time of a radically different and fast changing world: the end of the Cold War with the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the talk of "peace dividends"; in short, an international community groping for ideas and interests around which the world could come together. And the leadership that Malaysia demonstrated under Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir and Foreign Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, working closely with other countries, in respect of the Cambodian and the Bosnian conflicts, are two examples. Others included further strengthening links, especially with countries in the South, building new relationships with the emerging post-Soviet Commonwealth of Independent States and, not least, bringing on board the CLMV (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam) countries into an expanded and united ASEAN.

Indeed, Pak Lah made a particular mark for his consistent advocacy of good relations with all countries. This came in handy when Malaysia had to come to terms with a badly weakened ASEAN as a result of the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997. He placed great emphasis on improving ties with our major trading partners and neighbouring countries. In this regard, he saw real merits in Dr. Mahathir's initiative of an East Asian Economic Grouping (EAEG) and its later version, the East Asian Economic Caucus (EAEC). That closer cooperation among ASEAN and its East Asian partners to overcome the

financial crisis was vital. Pak Lah worked tirelessly to set in train a process to help revitalise a “wider East Asian cooperation” template.

He did this through the ASEAN Plus Three (APT) framework, comprising the ASEAN-10 and China, Japan and the Republic of Korea. Though it was speculated that the APT was structurally the reincarnation of EAEG/EAEC, functionally it was different. APT was born out of the 1997 financial turbulence and it was created to foster closer cooperation particularly in financial matters so as to mitigate the effects of the said crisis. But Pak Lah helped transform APT into a wider cooperative enterprise which, in turn, paved the way for the East Asia Summit (EAS), involving Australia, New Zealand and India, that became a reality under Pak Lah’s Prime Ministership. The two forums remain fundamental building blocks of an evolving regional architecture. APT would form the basis of East Asia integration and the EAS would serve as a forum for strategic dialogue. Simply put, these two forums are intended to foster major power cooperation, rather than major power competition.

In other words, under Pak Lah we saw a subtle “revision” of Mahathirism in our foreign policy and diplomacy. The transformation of EAEG/EAEC into APT and a more inclusive EAS are concrete examples of his contributions. The point being that Pak Lah was able to successfully pursue a potentially controversial foreign policy objective without provoking the hostility, suspicion or opposition of our major partners that would surely have ensued had he or the country opted for a more confrontational or megaphone diplomacy.

Diplomacy sometimes has to be hard-nosed but here again, only up to a point. Pak Lah knew that any diplomacy that damages the interests of the country itself are hardly in the tradition of the Tunku and King Ghaz — tradition that Malaysians have come to expect of our leaders. Pak Lah realised that Malaysia and the region too had

to brace itself in what was to become an increasingly interconnected world, in which the destinies of peoples and the threats they faced were intertwined. He was quick to realise the challenges of an age of interdependence, in which states can no longer be indifferent to what goes on behind borders. He was a firm believer in a multi-polar world and saw it as the antidote to a unipolar world.

He was a realist, too, in the conduct of our foreign policy and did not venture into this, that, and the other. He did what Malaysia could do. He knew that the most difficult thing in foreign policy is to form a judgement about the ills of the world and to accept that sometimes nothing sensible can be done about them. Above all, one of the reasons for his success as Foreign Minister, one that needs emphasising, is that he preferred to listen rather than lecture. As a strong admirer of King Ghaz, he was like the latter, in that his approach had nothing to do with national egotism. What mattered was national interest. Even where Malaysia disagreed with other countries, he made sure discussions were marked by respect.

He will, therefore, be best remembered for pursuing a pragmatic foreign policy. He helped rather subtly to moderate the rather “strident” diplomacy of previous years. Instead, Pak Lah focused on dealing with issues of vital interest to Malaysia and avoided unnecessary posturing. He was never harsh in his criticism of any country, as he knew it was simply not good diplomacy. When grandstanding got Malaysia on the wrong side of some countries, Pak Lah would soften things quietly. In short, he was liked by, and was able to deal effectively with, his foreign counterparts.

In the circumstances of the time, he acted, as a “cautionary” and “restraining” influence. He never second-guessed his boss. Knowing his station at work that it is the Prime Minister who decides on policy, he was at all times supportive of the Prime Minister. He,

however, remained ready to express his views, but more often behind the scenes. In other words, he was always cautious in his public pronouncements as well as soft-spoken, modest and he listened. To put it simply, his years at Wisma Putra were years of sober and steady diplomacy.

Dato' Deva Mohd Ridzam entered the Administrative and Diplomatic Service in 1971 and spent half his career at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs before being posted to Seoul, Vienna, Hanoi and Ottawa. He was the first resident Ambassador in Cambodia before heading the missions in Belgium, Luxembourg and the European Union. He is presently a Distinguished Fellow at the Institute of Strategic and International Studies, Malaysia.

An Overview

Chandran Jeshurun

The Background

The political life of Abdullah has been like the proverbial rise of the phoenix as he was well out of favour with Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamad when he supported Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah's "Team B" in the latter's challenge for the Presidency of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) in 1987. He had been the Minister of Defence at the time and was very much in line for higher appointments in Cabinet but, when "Team B" lost by the narrowest of margins in Malaysian political history, Abdullah was dismissed by the incumbent Prime Minister. Nevertheless, his political acumen led him to choose temporary oblivion rather than pursue the determined but hopelessly improbable cause of an alternative party to UMNO when Tengku Razaleigh launched his Semangat '46 party.

Consequently, he was in the political doldrums from then on but stuck loyally to UMNO in which his father had been one of the early stalwarts among its followers in Penang. Following the impressive success of Barisan Nasional in thwarting the pro-"Team B" challenge of Tengku Razaleigh and the Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) in the 1990 General Elections, Mahathir was faced with a dilemma in picking his key leaders in UMNO to serve in the new Cabinet. It was not entirely a surprise when he invited Abdullah to be the new

Minister of Foreign Affairs in place of the incumbent, Dato' Abu Hassan Omar, who had been assigned to the critical appointment of Menteri Besar of Selangor. By a happy coincidence, the senior men at Wisma Putra at that time were mostly people Abdullah had known as friends since his University of Malaya days which augured well for his return to the national leadership after a hiatus of some four years.

By 1991 Malaysian foreign policy had already become one of the prime motivations of Mahathir's proactive leadership at the domestic and international levels and it was imperative that he had a Minister in charge at Wisma Putra who could work well with the professionals in providing the necessary "back-up" for his overseas ventures. It was in meeting this challenge that Abdullah's rather self-effacing and relaxed personality came into its own as he was successful in paving the way for Mahathir's high-profile image as the pre-eminent leader not only in Southeast Asia but eventually the champion of the Third World or the South. Much as everyone regarded Abdullah as a newcomer to the world of international politics, not many are aware that, as the most prominent UMNO backbencher in the Dewan Rakyat after he was out of the Cabinet in 1987, he was sufficiently motivated to request the senior officials at Wisma Putra for briefings on the latest developments in foreign policy, from time to time.¹

One former Malaysian Ambassador to Japan around about that time noted that, during his occasional visits to Tokyo, before he assumed office, Abdullah was quite well versed about that country's foreign policy. It was then that the Ambassador realised that Abdullah's wife was of Japanese extraction as her mother was a pure-blooded Japanese lady.² All this clearly suggests that Abdullah was not entirely "green" when it came to the understanding of regional and international issues particularly in those post-Cold War days. Indeed, it is generally suspected that he was insistent on a Cabinet position as one of the senior Vice-Presidents of the party and had, therefore, politely declined Mahathir's offer of the position of head

of Kumpulan FIMA Berhad which was the Government's vehicle responsible for the development of the food-processing industry in Malaysia.

During his almost eight years as Minister of Foreign Affairs, Malaysia was at last beginning to build a name for itself as a relatively small Southeast Asian nation that was punching well above its weight largely owing to the Prime Minister's relentless zeal for turning sterling economic performance into meaningful diplomatic initiatives. This line of policy making inevitably placed a heavy burden on Wisma Putra's staff, and having an understanding and open-minded Minister who remained unquestioningly faithful to Mahathir's many spur-of-the moment interventions, made life much more bearable for the professionals. More than any other Prime Minister before him, Mahathir was to dictate the nation's foreign policy in an almost hands-on manner and it would take an unusually disciplined Cabinet minister to be able to act as his superior's primary agent in ensuring that the country achieved the most desirable results for our national interests.

There is no doubt that Abdullah was, by nature, extremely well suited to perform such a role especially in integrating himself so comfortably with the professional diplomats at Wisma Putra. Even though he did not pretend to be a master of the world of international politics, he was quick to learn how the intricacies of diplomacy were to be worked out and acted at all times in tandem with his senior advisers. The special quality that he brought to Malaysia's diplomatic style during his period in office as Malaysian Foreign Minister was his innate ability to, seemingly, make up for Mahathir's strident international postures by simply relying on his natural skills in making friends, gaining their confidence and demonstrating the less confrontational side of Malaysia's foreign policy. One of the very senior staff at Wisma Putra during those days has remarked that Abdullah largely succeeded as Mahathir's Foreign Minister "because he, first of all, played along with Dr. M, and, second, he had an

excellent team at Wisma Putra” especially under Ahmad Kamil as Secretary-General.³

Having been Prime Minister for more than a decade and weathered life-threatening political storms, Mahathir was all set in 1991 to boost his and the country’s international image by asserting himself in a number of new directions in his foreign policy. Some people have ventured to say that his overall confidence in his destiny to be not only the foremost national figure in the region but also an international statesman representing the countries of the South was definitely boosted by the retirement of Lee Kuan Yew as Prime Minister of Singapore at the end of 1990. The arenas in which Malaysia would be most active were not only the obvious ones such as the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) but also new fields such as East Asian multilateral cooperation and the South-South dialogue process. In this somewhat wide-ranging scheme of things that Malaysian foreign policy was to aggressively activate from 1991 onwards, Mahathir needed a colleague who was not politically over-ambitious to represent the country in his individual foreign initiatives and this was ideally found in the person of the tried and tested Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

Friends in Wisma Putra

Abdullah’s tenure at Wisma Putra would not have been such plain-sailing in a relative sense if not for the happy coincidence that the key men and women at the Ministry during those years were people he had known since his University of Malaya days who also happened to have the trust and confidence of Mahathir. The two who specially come to mind are Ahmad Kamil Jaafar who was Secretary-General from 1989 to 1995 and Razali Ismail who served as Malaysia’s Permanent Representative at the United Nations from 1988 to 1998. Even a much younger staff member in Wisma Putra at that time can recall that Abdullah always called her by her nickname, which was only used within her family, and this was one

of the typically down-to-earth ways in which he endeared himself to those who worked with him.⁴ Although Abdullah also got along well with Kamil's successor, Abdul Halim Ali, another University of Malaya veteran, the latter was, however, selected by Mahathir to become the new Chief Secretary of Government after having held the post in Wisma Putra for less than a month.⁵

Quite fortuitously, Halim's successor, Abdul Kadir Mohamad, had been one of the core group of the Ministry's policy planners during Kamil's tenure and, thus, Abdullah found no difficulty in keeping up with the established *modus operandi* of Wisma Putra when it had to cope with Mahathir's relentless demands. It says a lot that, on ascension to the Prime Minister's post in October 2003, Abdullah invited Kadir, who had retired by then, to become his Adviser for Foreign Affairs, a unique appointment that had not hitherto been resorted to by any previous Prime Minister. If an agreeable working relationship with his diplomatic service staff was a prerequisite for any Minister of Foreign Affairs, then it must be recognised that Abdullah was ideally placed in a portfolio that was not earnestly sought after by many up-and-coming UMNO politicians. Conversely, it was one of the few Ministries that Mahathir could safely entrust in the hands of someone who had been, in the past, closely allied with his own political rivals.

Almost one of Abdullah's first tasks as Foreign Minister was to publicly defend Mahathir's call for an East Asian Economic Grouping (EAEG) as it had come under sustained attack by the US Government and, to some extent, also by the Japanese, though less strident. Abdullah told a visiting Venezuelan delegation on 29 April 1991 that "it is an initiative to keep all markets, including those of this region, open to global trade, investment and other interaction" and that "no country need fear that it would become a trade bloc".⁶ The Malaysian determination for some sort of regional trading system, particularly in view of the

recent move by the European Community to bring into being a single European market by 1992, was stressed further when he addressed the Malaysian Economic Association's seminar in Penang on 8 July 1991. The EAEG, he said, would "enhance the sense of well-being and security of East Asian countries through economic growth and the advancement of cooperative politics", although the latter was left undefined.⁷ But the tone of Malaysian foreign policy was by then unquestionably economics-driven as the Prime Minister had made it the main template for achieving his Vision 2020 goal — Malaysia as a fully developed society.

Mahathir obviously realised somewhat belatedly that his EAEG would have no hope of taking off without first being accepted by his ASEAN partners and so, not surprisingly, Malaysia's position as ASEAN Standing Committee chairman in 1991 provided Wisma Putra some opportune moments to drum up support within ASEAN. Once again it was Abdullah's responsibility to take up the cudgels in propagating an idea of basically preparing for the anticipated protectionism of trading systems in Europe and North America that had originally driven Mahathir to call for an EAEG. Some progress was made with the setting up of the ASEAN Working Group on EAEG to work on the proposal as a truly ASEAN-driven concept and Singapore, which had initially been suspected as not favourably inclined to Mahathir's initial proposal, offered to host the next meeting of the Working Group.⁸ With regard to Thailand, Abdullah got off to a promising start as its new Foreign Minister, Arsa Sarasin, was like himself attending their first Joint Commission meeting in Langkawi in February 1992 when the latter warmly remembered his early days as First Secretary at the Royal Thai Embassy in Kuala Lumpur some twenty-five years ago.⁹

What was wholly unexpected and was to become something of a *cause celebre* in Malaysian foreign policy that year was the outbreak of inter-ethnic violence in the Balkans as the new Republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina came under sustained armed attacks by the Serbs. It

proved to be a major goal of Dr. Mahathir's external policies that a relatively small, fast developing country such as Malaysia should come forward to lead the diplomatic and military campaign to defend the sovereignty and independence of the Bosnians and to draw international attention to the extensive human rights abuses there. Abdullah was inevitably thrust forward in the international community as Malaysia attempted to engage the major powers in finding a quick and equitable solution to the Balkan conflict although it was understandable that, on the first visit of a Malaysian Minister to the Russian Federation in May 1992, he was discreet enough not to raise the matter in Moscow. One of the venues in which Malaysia sought to put pressure on the interested parties in the Balkans was the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in which Abdullah was a newcomer but, by all accounts, played an effective role. Similarly, he was also burdened with the Prime Minister's passion for the environment and, thus, the Foreign Ministry took on the brunt of the campaign for the sustainable management of natural resources and Abdullah found himself in the limelight when the so-called "Earth Summit" was convened in Rio de Janeiro in June. This, too, was a responsibility that he adjusted his personal inclinations to serve, in the context of the UNCED (UN Conference on Environment and Development), much as all of it was totally new to him due to his lack of experience in such subjects.

By the end of 1992 it appeared that Abdullah was fitting very well into his job as he was invited by The Asia Society in New York to address its members when he was there for the UN General Assembly (UNGA). It was a kind of an oblique compliment to him as the Prime Minister himself had similarly addressed the Society's members just the year before when he too was attending the UNGA although his focus was on the Vision 2020 national target. In Abdullah's case, Wisma Putra took advantage of the Foreign Minister's talk to have some blunt words said about the state of Malaysia-US relations particularly in relation to the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) concept and EAEC.¹⁰ Two of the major concerns of

Malaysia during most of the years between 1991 and 1999 being the struggle to uphold Bosnia-Herzegovina and the deliberate build-up and strengthening of South-South cooperation, it was quite obvious that the Foreign Minister had to necessarily defer to the indefatigable Dr. Mahathir who handled them directly through Wisma Putra's senior officers. Many of the latter, however, have testified to the fact that Abdullah was always kept fully informed of what his Ministry was involved in and the expectations of the Prime Minister in these major efforts. But, clearly, even they had to work with various outside bodies both within and outside the country in the organisation of such vital components of the Prime Minister's grand designs like the Langkawi International Dialogue which was launched in 1995.¹¹

Final Years at Wisma Putra

In the regional context, one of the most significant moments in Malaysian diplomacy was the understanding that was reached with Indonesia to formally refer their territorial dispute over the islands of Ligitan and Sipadan to the International Court of Justice in May 1977.¹² This was something of an important achievement for Wisma Putra as Abdullah had to contend with a rather tough counterpart in the person of the Indonesian Foreign Minister then, the late Ali Alatas. As the region was continuing its phenomenal growth and its economies were bursting at their seams, there was much shared euphoria among countries like Indonesia, Singapore and Thailand that eventually led even the usually staid and guarded Abdullah to confidently talk of an "ASEAN-10" in which the remaining four states would be brought into its fold.¹³ Malaysia, therefore, campaigned actively for bringing them in as fellow-members of ASEAN although this was only finally achieved in 1999.

On the other hand, though, he had the unfortunate duty of having to pledge extensive military and financial aid to the cause of Bosnia-Herzegovina in late 1997 just as the Asian financial crisis hit the region, and countries like Malaysia, in particular. His standing in

regional politics as Malaysia's Foreign Minister, too, was beginning to become somewhat awkward because of the policy differences that were slowly making the rounds in Kuala Lumpur circles between the Prime Minister and his erstwhile Deputy, Dato' Seri Anwar Ibrahim, around that time. One example of this was the official stand of the Government over the hard line of the Thai Government and its Foreign Minister, Surin Pitsuwan, an Anwar ally, against the Myanmar military regime. When questioned about it in Parliament, Abdullah had to simply state that the Government's view of the policy of constructive engagement being urged upon ASEAN by Thailand did not quite conform with Malaysia's belief that political change in that country could not be expected to happen in the short-term but would require time.¹⁴ Ironically, it was to be the rupture in the relations between the Prime Minister and his Deputy in 1998 that resulted in Abdullah's elevation to the vacated post of Deputy Prime Minister in 1999 and, ultimately, succeed Dr. Mahathir as Malaysia's fifth Prime Minister in 2003.¹⁵

There could not have been a more fitting conclusion to this overview essay than Abdullah's fervent belief in Wisma Putra and its staff which was emphatically stated after he had succeeded Dr. Mahathir as Prime Minister in 2003. The occasion was the gathering of the Malaysian Heads of Mission in Kuala Lumpur on 2 April 2007, the fiftieth anniversary of *Merdeka*, when he unhesitatingly spelt out the need for Wisma Putra's emissaries to further the goal of making Malaysia a truly globalised world-class economy in the coming fifty years. Globalisation and its inevitability meant that Malaysia's "economic imperative is therefore to vie for and attract foreign direct investments, sustain domestic investments, and continue to be significant in the global trading environment". As Malaysia also needed "to have the trust and confidence of all its international partners", he urged its diplomats to not only aim to project the country "as a credible and reliable economic collaborator but also a trustworthy friend".

He emphasised that, while the target of becoming a developed nation by 2020 should remain the fundamental priority in our foreign policy, we should never abandon “the campaign for a more just and equitable international order”. His parting advice to the ambassadors was that they must understand that the conduct of foreign relations was “no longer the exclusive purview of the Foreign Ministry” as many other Government agencies have become inextricably involved in international affairs. He paid a tribute to those who had served Wisma Putra in the past and urged the present generation of Malaysian diplomats to always be mindful of the enormous contributions of “those who had pioneered the foreign service... through their sophisticated diplomatic skills and... high expertise in international affairs”. He was, thus most confident that Wisma Putra, “which has a tradition of excellence, will be able to rise to the occasion... in charting the course of Malaysia’s future diplomacy”.¹⁶

Even after he had already announced his plans to hand over the Premiership at the end of March 2009, Abdullah took special delight in officiating at the opening of the new campus of the Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations on 8 January 2009. It was, after all, an institution that had been originally founded during his tenure as Foreign Minister in 1991 and he reminisced that what “was once the cradle of our diplomacy in the early days of the nation’s history, has now become the ‘nursery’ and training ground for our current and future generations who choose a career in diplomacy”. Again, in looking back into history, he was “gratified that as a relatively young nation, Malaysia has acquitted itself well in the conduct of its relations with the rest of the world”. He emphasized that “the strength of Malaysia’s foreign policy and diplomacy this past half a century lies in the consistency of its principles and balanced approach, anchored upon safeguarding the national interests and fulfilling our responsibility as a staunch member of the international community”.

As a reflection of his own personal convictions, Abdullah called for “a place for ethics and rationality in a nation’s foreign policy...[as] the world would be a better place — and a more peaceful domain — if ethics and morality are given due weight in the conduct of international relations”. In relation to this, a proposal was made “for a broad forum for a more informed discussion of regional and international issues involving policy-makers and other stake-holders in the country”. He felt that such “a neutral forum... or a council on foreign relations and diplomacy that is independent and dedicated to increasing Malaysia’s understanding of the world — through objective debate, discussion and research — could contribute positively to the country’s foreign policy and diplomacy”. This was quite an unexpected initiative on his part and it did provoke a fair amount of mostly favourable commentary in the media but it should be understood that his aim was to tap the minds of “prominent Malaysians from diverse backgrounds” who could “provide a healthy cross-fertilisation of ideas, a deep and objective understanding of foreign affairs, and create a common ground for national consensus on policies”. It almost sounded as if Pak Lah had, through his long years of heading the Ministry during challenging times, finally established a rather proud and well-deserved niche for himself in the history of Malaysia’s foreign policy.¹⁷

The late Dr Chandran Jeshurun was the Director, Division of Academic Studies, Research and Publications at the Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations. He was formerly Professor of Asian History at the University of Malaya.

Notes

- 1 Personal information from Dato' Abdul Majid Mohamad who was at that time one of the Deputy Secretary-Generals at Wisma Putra.
- 2 Personal information from Tan Sri Ahmad Kamil Jaafar who served in Tokyo from 1986 to 1989.
- 3 E-mail from Dato' Deva Ridzam to the author, 23 February 2009.
- 4 Datuk Dr. Rajmah Hussain, who retired as Ambassador to the United States in 2008, had known him since his Civil Service days when she had just joined Wisma Putra. Private conversation with Datuk Dr. Rajmah on 20 February 2009.
- 5 This was a rather ground-breaking event as it was the first time that someone from the "foreign service" had been picked for the plum job in the Malaysian Administrative and Diplomatic Service (known by its Malay acronym "PTD"). The fact that Halim had been working under Abdullah no doubt brought some appreciation of the latter's seniority in the political hierarchy.
- 6 *Foreign Affairs Malaysia* (hereafter referred to as *FAM*), Vol. 24, No 2, June 1991, p. 10.
- 7 *FAM*, 24/3, September 1991, p. 3.
- 8 *Op.cit.* p. 21.
- 9 *FAM*, 25/1, January 1992, p. 25.
- 10 *FAM*, 25/3, September 1992, pp. 90-93.
- 11 *FAM*, 28/3, September 1995, pp. 6-9. Dato' Deva Ridzam, who was in charge of the West Asia and Africa desk at Wisma Putra at that time, has revealed to the author the extent to which some of the responsibility on South-South cooperation, for example, was delegated to other Ministries of the Government that dealt with energy and public utilities matters. The interesting thing is that Abdullah does not seem to have taken exception to this sort of "interference" in his portfolio probably due to his own lack of enthusiasm for some of Mahathir's South-South activism which at times did look as if it had gone overboard. Personal information from Dato' Deva Ridzam.

- 12 *FAM*, 30/2, June 1997, pp. 28-29.
- 13 *FAM*, 29/1, March 1996, pp. 30-35.
- 14 See Chandran Jeshurun, *Malaysia: Fifty Years of Diplomacy, 1957-2007*, (Singapore: Talisman Press, 2008), p. 290.
- 15 Other than Tun Abdul Razak and Tun Dr. Ismail Abdul Rahman (who rose to become Deputy Prime Minister in 1970), no one else who had been Foreign Minister had ever succeeded to higher political office. Pak Lah was the first “outsider” who rose from the side-lined portfolio of Foreign Minister, especially under Tun Dr. Mahathir, to become Prime Minister.
- 16 “Keynote Address by the Honourable Dato’ Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, Prime Minister of Malaysia, at the Conference of the Heads of Malaysian Missions”, 2 April 2007, www.pmo.gov.my accessed on 28 August 2007.
- 17 “Defining Malaysia’s Place in the World”, Speech by Dato’ Seri Abdullah bin Haji Ahmad Badawi at the Official Launching of the New Campus of the Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations, 8 January 2009, www.pmo.gov.my accessed on 20 February 2009.



Handing over of duties by Datuk (later Tan Sri) Haji Abu Hassan bin Haji Omar (right) to Datuk Abdullah Haji Ahmad Badawi (left) who took over the portfolio of Foreign Minister from 15 March 1991.

(By courtesy of the New Straits Times)



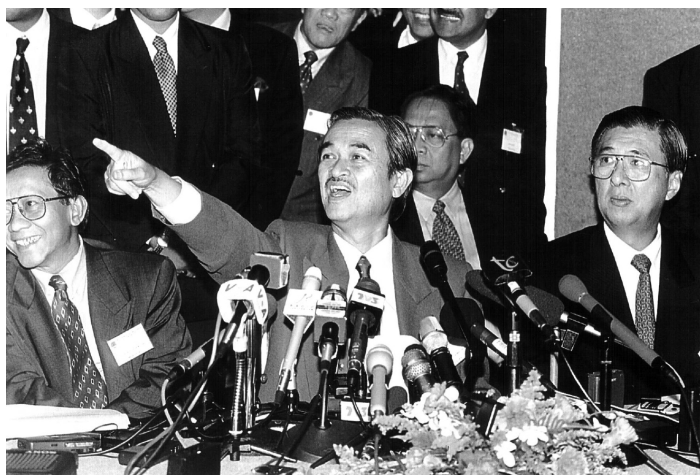
Foreign Minister Abdullah and Thailand's new Foreign Minister, Arsa Sarasin, in Pulau Langkawi for the first Malaysia-Thailand Joint Commission meeting on 16-17 February 1992.

(By courtesy of the New Straits Times)



Abdullah handing over the cheque for RM 13.6 million to the representative of the Palestine National Council Authority at Wisma Putra on 2 February 1994.

(By courtesy of the New Straits Times)



“Next Question”, Abdullah at the Press Conference at the end of the Special ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting in Kuala Lumpur on 31 May 1997. He is flanked by the Philippines Foreign Minister, Domingo Siazon Jr. (right), and Foreign Ministry Secretary-General, Datuk (later Tan Sri) Abdul Kadir Mohamad (left).

(By courtesy of the New Straits Times)



Abdullah at an informal meeting of ASEAN Foreign Ministers in New York on 3 October 1997.

(By courtesy of the New Straits Times)



Abdullah giving his briefing on the Foreign Minister's level meeting for the upcoming G-15 Summit on 2 November 1997.

He is flanked by Datuk (later Tan Sri) Abdul Kadir Mohamad, Secretary-General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (left) and Datuk N. Parameswaran, Deputy Secretary-General (Multilateral Affairs), Ministry of Foreign Affairs (right).

(By courtesy of the New Straits Times)



Foreign Minister, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi (centre) greeting Mr Aburizal Bakrie, a prominent Indonesian businessman (left), while Mr Rodolfo Severino, the ASEAN Secretary-General (right), looks on at the official opening of the ASEAN-CCI Conference in Kuala Lumpur on 9 April 1998.

(By courtesy of the New Straits Times)



Abdullah and Mr. Don McKinnon (New Zealand counterpart) after a meeting in Kuala Lumpur on 26 October 1998.

(By courtesy of the New Straits Times)



Abdullah at a press conference after delivering a closing speech as a Chairman at the sixth meeting of the 30th ASEAN Standing Committee held in Vietnam from 15-16 December 1998. On his left is ASEAN Secretary-General, (later Tan Sri) Ajit Singh and Director-General of ASEAN – Malaysia, Datuk Abdul Majid Ahmad Khan on his right.

(By courtesy of the New Straits Times)



Abdullah listening to points conveyed by Muhamed Sacirbey, Foreign Minister of Bosnia, at the Organization of Islamic Conference special meeting in Kuala Lumpur.

(By courtesy of the New Straits Times)