

# A matured nation strives ahead

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THE transfer of leadership from Tun Hussein Onn to Datuk Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamad in July last year highlighted Malaysia's political maturity. An ailing leader stepped aside, and his mandate was assumed by his deputy with unanimous approval of the ruling party — underlining the value of the mechanism built into the party structure to ensure smooth succession.

In 1971, Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj, the country's pioneering Prime Minister, relinquished his post in favour of Tun Abdul Razak. Although the Tunku had long designated the late Tun Razak as his successor, the change was hastened by the outbreak of racial violence in May 1969 and the subsequent suspension of parliamentary rule.

The next succession was even more abrupt when in February 1976 Tun Razak passed away unexpectedly in London. Tun Hussein, who only a few years earlier had made a political comeback, was forced to shoulder the burden of taking

over a grieving nation.

The timing of transfer of power from Tun Hussein to Datuk Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohammad on July 16, 1981, was by contrast a matter of choice, permitting careful preparation for it. The successor lost no time in making a strong impact on the country's political scene because he came to the job backed by a strong party mandate.

This could very well be due to the fact that, except during the three-year period he was out of Umno after his expulsion in 1969, Dr Mahathir had taken continuous and active interest in the country's political affairs. Even when he was temporarily out of the party, he remained a respected and popular political figure.

During his apprenticeship under Tun Razak and Tun Hussein, Dr Mahathir made the best use of his time to refine his knowledge of all aspects of the nation's political and economic affairs. People who know him well say there were times when Dr Mahathir felt that his superiors had not given him

enough to do.

The decisiveness of his actions was partly due to his having a well-defined credo before he came to office — as outlined in his book the *Malay Dilemma* in which he spelt out reasons for the backwardness of the Malays and suggested the means of overcoming them.

Although he would now rightly argue that many of the problems he cited in the book had either been taken care of by subsequent measures taken under the New Economic Policy, the fact remains that he came into the government with a set of ideas on how to tackle the country's basic problem — economic inequality. This makes him a more ideological Prime Minister than his predecessors, except perhaps for Tun Razak.

Dr Mahathir has taken over at a time when the international environment is undergoing rapid changes with political, economic and social consequences for the country. In particular, the world-wide resurgence of Islam is a factor to take into account.

On the economic plane,

North-South tensions have increased in proportion to the depth of recession despite loud and frequent proclamations from Northern leaders affirming their agreement to a more equitable distribution of opportunities in the form of the new international economic order (NIEO).

At home, changing circumstances, among them the rising importance of oil revenue, the worsening effect of recession and the changing profile of voters to include greater number of well-educated and politically articulate individuals, had necessitated drastic, and sometimes seemingly harsh actions.

On assuming office in this setting, Dr Mahathir decided to give priority to a crusade against corruption because he perceived this to be Umno's Achilles' heel. His zeal in this crusade has expressed itself not only in the form of rising arrests for corruption but more significantly in his attempts to restructure the Malaysian way of thinking, working and behaving.

His unrelenting drive

against corruption has put a considerable number of people, including political figures, in a very shaky position. His scrutiny has been so pervasive that there have been suggestions that he should slow down.

He admits that the fight against corruption is not going to be easy. He knows that if he is to act on mere suspicion, it would disrupt the administration of the country. But at the same time he does not want the guilty to go undetected.

His aides and advisors said that quite apart from cases being investigated by the Anti-Corruption Agency, Dr Mahathir is also being kept posted on the activities of top civil servants, officials of statutory bodies, corporations and politicians which appear incompatible with their incomes.

## Fear

Dr Mahathir is making the war on corruption the war of the rakyat. In an interview with the country's leading newspapers and *Bernama* on completing his first 100 hundred days as the Prime Minister, Dr Mahathir said while he might not be able to act against all corrupt officials and politicians, he hoped to instill the fear of