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In the age of wisdom and maturity

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AS we approach the fortieth anniversary of our independence from foreign rule, we should perhaps pause and reflect on the state of the nation for the past 40 years. For people, 40 years is said to be the age of maturity and wisdom. Prophet Muhammad only became the Messenger of Allah at the age of 40.

The fate of any nation is determined by the motivation of its government and the will of God.

In the case of Malaysia, the ship of state is captained by the Prime Minister. We have been blessed by having the right Prime Minister at the right time. We have had four Prime Ministers.

In chronological order, Tunku Abdul Rahman was a simple man who made simple decisions. Tun Abdul Razak was a complicated man who made simple decisions. Tun Hussein Onn was a simple man who made complicated decisions. Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is a complicated man who makes complicated decisions.

Tunku Abdul Rahman presided over a nation during its transition from colonialism to independence. It was a smooth and ceremonious transition. No blood was shed. Not a single shot was fired. Unlike other nations who won independence in the 1950s and 1960s, there was no nationalisation of foreign companies and assets. Business went on as usual marked only by the ceremonial departures of British troops and expatriate government officers. The ordinary people carried on life as before.

Tun Abdul Razak had a long tenure, about 13 years, as Deputy Prime Minister. At times he was even compared with Rab Butler, the luckless and long-serving British Deputy Prime Minister who was passed over twice and never made it to 10 Downing Street.

Since then, other Deputy Prime Ministers have had short terms. One died, two became Prime Ministers and two others resigned. The other day, I met Tan Sri Musa Hitam and said to him that if he had remained in the Government he would still be a deputy and broken Tun Abdul Razak's record. His retort: That is why I left!

Tun Abdul Razak's main concern was the jobless, the underemployed and the landless. He initiated the Federal Land Development Scheme for the landless and encouraged the establishment of labour-intensive industries. He became known as the Father of Development.

The Tun once lamented that senior civil servants were not showing proper respect to his Ministers and asked me why. The reason, of course, was historical. Before independence all the best and qualified people were in government service. Indeed, the independence movement was led by government officers like Datuk Onn Jaafar, Tunku Abdul Rahman and Tun Abdul Razak who eventually resigned from government service to enter active politics.

The rank-and-file of political party members were teachers and others who were not qualified to enter government service in senior positions.

The upshot was that senior officers who were university graduates with wide experience in public administration at ministry level were better qualified than some of the ministers. At the ensuing general elections, the Tun nominated better qualified candidates and his government came to be known as the government of technocrats.

Tun Hussein Onn's Prime Ministership was marked by the delicate task of sorting out a number of sensitive political problems in which he largely

succeeded.

To cushion the enforced retirement of politicians who had overstayed in public office or intending to seek renomination, he introduced the pension scheme for ministers and Members of Parliament. His best quote: "I am not important but my job is". He retired gracefully as PM because he said his physical health prevented him from fully discharging the duties expected of a Prime Minister.

We enter the era of Dr Mahathir, thus far the longest-serving PM. He first set out to change the mindset of all Malaysians - to think and act positively that we are as good as anybody else in the world, if not better. We can do all the things that other people do.

Economically, he launched the country into heavy industry and manufacturing with the accent on exports. He has now moved into high-tech industries. And just as well. We are actually facing a labour shortage which accounts for the influx of immigration, both legal and illegal.

His repeated calls, if not heeded, for increased productivity and low costs or we perish, is best illustrated by the recent announcement of Philips, the internationally-known manufacturer of all things electrical and electronic, that it is closing down its Penang factory and moving its operations to China.

Above all, Dr Mahathir has made Malaysia known to the world and is the acknowledged spokesman of the Third World.

Malaysia can be proud of its achievements during the 40 years last past, thanks to our Prime Ministers - past and present - and the response of the people.

With the attainment of maturity and wisdom as a nation, we can move forward with confidence to achieve greater heights and success.

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