

27/08/1997

Musa: Handling crisis the real test of leadership

Hayati Hayatudin

KUALA LUMPUR, Tues. - Drawing from his turbulent years in politics and Government, former Deputy Prime Minister Tan Sri Musa Hitam has this to say about a crisis: the real test of leadership is being embroiled in one and anticipating and recognising it early.

Call it crisis leadership but Musa, 63, has intimate insight and knowledge about confronting crises during his heady years as Umno deputy president between 1981 and 1986.

"It is important for a leader or manager not to fool themselves," he said today, "and try to think the crisis away, lest it becomes a bigger disaster."

He was giving a talk, "Leaders vs Managers: The Pathway to Development", during a luncheon organised by the Malaysian Institute of Management.

Musa's political career revved into high gear in 1981 when he fought then fellow Umno vice-president and Finance Minister Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah for the deputy president's post vacated by Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad who went on to become party president and Prime Minister.

After winning the contest, Musa, who was then Education Minister, was appointed by Dr Mahathir as Deputy Prime Minister and Home Minister.

His tenure as Umno's No 2 was challenged in the 1984 party elections, again by Tengku Razaleigh, but the latter was defeated.

Musa's political career entered a dramatic phase in 1986 when he had a fallout with Dr Mahathir and resigned on March 14 that year as Deputy Prime Minister.

This set the motion for the biggest battle of his political life the following year: becoming a running mate to arch rival Tengku Razaleigh in their failed attempt to oust Dr Mahathir and Tun Ghafar Baba, who was appointed Deputy Prime Minister after Musa's resignation.

After losing in Umno's most fractious elections ever, Musa went into what political observers described as his wilderness years but after patching up with the Umno leadership, he resurfaced in 1990 to become Malaysia's special envoy to the United Nations in New York.

He now holds the chairmanship of several listed companies, including Lion Land Bhd.

Against this political backdrop, Musa said the real test of leadership was in times of a crisis that develops gradually and the way it was managed.

"A critical situation," he said, "requires calm and rational analysis, understanding based on facts... attempts to manage a crisis in an emotional state of mind will enlarge the crisis."

Musa said there was now no difference in leadership between running a government agency and a private company.

Leaders then, he said, were just "leaders" while the managers implemented decisions.

"Now leaders are managers and managers must possess leadership qualities," he said.

As for leadership in the advent of information technology, Musa said there was no room for indecisiveness, uncertainties and lack of innovation.

On his impression of the country's industrial and business leaders, Musa was critical of them, saying that they were "too dependent on the political leadership when implementing change".

"If this trend keeps up too often too long," he said, "it could become a business culture that moves slowly downwards... it could kill initiative and innovative skills."

(END)