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PM's leave generates much interest

A. Kadir Jasin

IF indeed Malaysians big and small, mighty and humble, are half as sincere in expressing gratitude to Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad as they appear to be, they should accept his explanation for his impending two-month leave and the reason for appointing Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim as acting Prime Minister.

Speaking to the Press upon his return from a three-nation official tour of Africa on Thursday, the Prime Minister said he was taking extended leave to rest and to put his thoughts on paper.

He said with the country enjoying stability, the time was ripe for him to go on long leave which he had not enjoyed since becoming Prime Minister. Responding to the Press, he said the leave had nothing to do with his health.

In the past decade, many Malaysians, regardless of whether they are on the side of the Government, against it or neutral, have openly acknowledged Dr Mahathir's success in transforming the country to what it is today.

This point is pertinent in understanding the changing attitude of the people towards the Prime Minister as he approaches the 16th anniversary of his leadership next month.

It is recalled that just over a decade ago, not an insignificant number of Malaysians had called for his ouster, blaming him for the 1985/86 economic recession which, for the first time, saw the country recording a negative growth.

His opponents in and outside Umno said only his ouster would revive the economy and save the country. Even his closest allies were either deserting him or were having second thoughts about his ability to govern. A lesser mortal would have succumbed and given up.

But proving yet again that he thrived on challenges, Dr Mahathir subjected the political elite to a shock treatment. He brought into the Cabinet a political unknown - Tun Daim Zainuddin - as Finance Minister and liberalised the economy.

Daim's appointment and Anwar's meteoric rise in Umno and the Government caused considerable resentment among the entrenched interest groups in the party, which manifested itself in the opposition to Dr Mahathir's leadership in the 1987 Umno election.

His calculated risk-taking worked. From a minus one per cent growth in 1985, the economy recovered speedily to 1.2 per cent in 1986, 5.3 per cent in 1987 and thereafter in excess of eight per cent annually.

Today, very few Malaysians, including the very same people who wanted him out over a decade ago, would dare to think of living without him. These include the very same people who partied on the evening of the 1987 Umno election, confident that he would be defeated by Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah for the post of Umno president.

He won narrowly and as circumstances would have it, among the biggest beneficiaries of his pragmatic economic policy were several businessmen, mostly non-Bumiputeras, who had gathered with Tengku Razaleigh in anticipation of his victory.

It is for these and other related reasons since he became Prime Minister that talk of his going on long leave has generated so much interest.