

01/06/1997

Significance of appointing older leaders

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THE departure of two Menteris Besar (Kedah and Selangor) since the 1995 general election and the appointment of older persons to the post of Malacca Chief Minister are not without significance.

In making these changes, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is sending a wave of strong and unmistakable messages to State and national leaders.

In not so many words, Dr Mahathir is saying: "Do not take me for granted. Do not misread my tolerance as a sign of weakness. Do not assume that I do not know the tricks up your sleeves and the skeletons in your closets."

The significance of these changes is further emphasised by the fact that both the displaced Menteris Besar were "Dr Mahathir's men". He appointed them State chief executives.

They were young, largely inexperienced and relatively unknown when he selected them from among better known and more senior politicians. When he became Prime Minister in 1981, Dr Mahathir promoted many young and inexperienced politicians to important Federal and State posts; his way of renewing Umno and the Government.

Many of them were in their 30s or early 40s when they were appointed Menteris Besar, Chief Ministers and Ministers. At the time of their appointment, they were seen as untainted by political, material and moral corruption.

Tan Sri Osman Aroff was 45 when he was made Kedah MB in 1985 and Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib was 41 when he was appointed Selangor MB in 1986. Sanusi was 53 when he became Kedah MB and Selangor MB-designate Abu Hassan is 56.

Almost all of today's Umno Ministers, Menteris Besar and Chief Minister were appointed by Dr Mahathir. The only exceptions are the Terengganu Menteri Besar, Tan Sri Wan Mokhtar Ahmad, who was appointed by the late Tun Abdul Razak in 1974 and International Trade and Industry Minister, Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz, by the late Tun Hussein in 1981.

Today's leaders grew and matured under Dr Mahathir's leadership, though not necessarily in his mould, to become experienced and influential politicians in their own right.

Regrettably, however, power and experience have brought about neither wisdom nor a sense of gratitude to some of them. Instead, they have made some of them arrogant and others careless.

And as the Chinese proverb goes: "Those who seek power for personal ends eventually run afoul of popular opinion."

As for Dr Mahathir, his policy seems to parallel the saying of Honore de Balzac, considered one of the greatest writers of all time, that "power is not revealed by striking hard or often, but by striking true".

It is within this context that his advice to the new Malacca Chief Minister, Datuk Abu Zahar Isnin, is best seen. Speaking in London, Dr Mahathir said: "I hope he uses his power well, sincerely and wisely. Do not abuse the power given by the people."