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Appointing a DPM: There's many a slip betwixt cup and lip

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"TO be or not to be. That is the question" which faced Shakespeare's Hamlet and now confronting the Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad. Should a Deputy Prime Minister be appointed right now?

Upon the dismissal of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim from that office on Sept 2, Dr Mahathir said that he was going to keep the job open for the time being. Since then there seems to be mounting pressure from several quarters including the leader of the Opposition in Parliament and business circles that a Deputy Prime Minister should be urgently appointed.

It is argued that such an appointment will bring stability to the country because the succession to the stewardship of the country will become apparent. Perhaps there is confusion here between constitutionality and tradition.

There is no specific provision in the Constitution establishing the office of Deputy Prime Minister. There is a Prime Minister and Ministers. All Ministers other than the Prime Minister hold office during the pleasure of the Yang di-Pertuan Agong.

The office of Deputy Prime Minister is at best a first among equals, vis-a-vis the other ministers. His appointment can be revoked at any time just like any other minister.

The office was first created by Tunku Abdul Rahman who held the view that a Prime Minister should be free from the details of day to day administration. He appointed Datuk Abdul Razak B. Hussein who was then the Minister of National Development as Deputy Prime Minister.

Abdul Razak was then conferred the title "Tun", the first Minister to be so honoured, which raised his status and authority considerably.

Abdul Razak consolidated the office of the Deputy Prime Minister by initially co-ordinating the functions of all ministries involved in national development which meant practically every other ministry. The Ministry of National Development became the premier ministry, second only to the Prime Minister's Department.

As Deputy Prime Minister, he had a foot in the Prime Minister's Department as well. There was no doubt then that Abdul Razak was the second most powerful man in the country. He certainly made many of the Government's executive decisions.

He held the office for 15 years as the Tunku's patient and loyal deputy until becoming Prime Minister on the Tunku's retirement.

During this entire period, Abdul Razak was regularly re-elected as the deputy president of Umno. It thus established the tradition that the deputy president of Umno automatically became the Deputy Prime Minister. And so Tun Hussein Onn succeeded Abdul Razak and Dr Mahathir succeeded Hussein as Prime Minister.

Constitutionally there is nothing to stop Dr Mahathir from advising the Yang di-Pertuan Agong to appoint any member of the Dewan Rakyat or Senator to be the Deputy Prime Minister now. It will not be the first time for him.

Thus far, Dr Mahathir has had three deputies, namely, Tan Sri Musa Hitam, Tun Abdul Ghafar Baba and Anwar. But all three were the deputy president of Umno at the time of their appointment.

Today there is no deputy president of Umno because Anwar has been expelled from the party. The next party election is not due till June. Any person appointed Deputy Prime Minister now will gain an edge over all

others in the election.

Perhaps the solution is to declare beforehand, if an appointment is made now, that it is only up to June. It is then up to the person concerned to contest the party elections to be deputy president to keep the tradition of being Deputy Prime Minister as well.

One would have thought that the Umno constitution provided for the automatic succession of the president by the deputy president, and of the deputy president by a vice-president (in order of seniority), in the event of a vacancy until the next party election.

Even so there is no guarantee that the succession will be apparent. Many a Raja Muda, much favoured by the Sultan, has been known not to finally ascend the throne because the Council of Succession decided otherwise after the death of the Ruler.

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