

11/10/1998

Dr M not short of DPM candidates

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DATUK Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's decision to leave the post of Umno deputy president vacant until next year's party assembly and to keep the Deputy Prime Minister's job unfilled may not have come as a complete surprise but it nevertheless raises several fundamental questions.

The decision does not come as a surprise for a number of reasons. Firstly, the choice of a new deputy president is made difficult by the events of the last few months which culminated in the sacking of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim from the Cabinet and the party just over a month ago.

Personally, Dr Mahathir must have been badly stung by these events and by the developments following Anwar's sacking.

Dr Mahathir must have felt that the decision to fill the deputy president's post should not be his alone.

Secondly, the decision reflected not only his hesitation to act alone but served as an acknowledgement that the field from which the candidate is to be picked is too limited.

Over the years, the holders of the vice-president's posts who could be considered for promotion had been reduced to two, namely, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and Datuk Seri Najib Tun Abdul Razak.

Although they are qualified and are way ahead of Anwar in terms of seniority (Abdullah became an MP in 1978 and Najib in 1976 as opposed to Anwar in 1982) Dr Mahathir seems to favour allowing the larger party membership to make the choice.

Without casting any doubt on the ability of the two men, it would be better for Umno to wait for an opportunity to consider a wider choice of candidates for the number two post.

With the benefit of hindsight, a number of conclusions can be drawn as to why Umno is facing this rather unfortunate situation.

Firstly, since Anwar successfully out-manoeuvred Tun Ghafar Baba in the 1993 party election to grab the deputy president's post, the line of succession in the party and Government was seen as firmly established.

Anwar's position was seen as unassailable because his so-called Team Wawasan (the Vision Team) swept all the three vice-president's posts, the Youth head post and many of the supreme council seats.

Since then, however, only Najib, who was on the fringes of the Team Wawasan survives the test of time. By the 1996 party election, the team was as good as dead.

The Umno Youth chief Tan Sri Abdul Rahim Tamby Chik was the first casualty among the team members. He was forced to vacate the post as well as the post of Malacca Chief Minister in 1994 following allegations of sexual liaison with a 15-year-old girl.

He was not charged but Attorney-General Tan Sri Mohtar Abdullah said doubts had been created as a result of police investigations into the allegations.

Ironically, Rahim's exit was to a large degree hastened by Anwar's stand on the issue as played out by Datuk Ahmad Zahid Hamidi.

The biggest casualty to the team happened in the 1996 party election when Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin was eliminated from the VP line-up and Abdullah made a spectacular comeback as vice-president.

Anwar's consolation was the victory of Zahid and Datuk Dr Siti Zaharah Sulaiman as Youth and Wanita chief respectively. Both were closely aligned to him.

Last week, history repeated itself when Zahid himself was forced to resign as Youth chief for his involvement in Anwar's reformasi movement. He is now facing the likelihood of being sacked from the party. Siti Zaharah, however, remains loyal to the leadership.

Another victim from the Team Wawasan was the former Selangor Menteri Besar, Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib. He voluntarily resigned from all Government posts and took leave from party posts following his arrest in Australia for allegedly failing to declare currencies when leaving that country.

He was charged in a Brisbane court but was found not guilty. The prosecution is appealing against the judgment. Muhammad appears to be with the party over Anwar's sacking.