

27/02/1998

Leaders' ability to govern put to test with current economic problems

Datuk Seri Adib Adam

I WAS asked recently who I thought most likely to inherit the Prime Minister's mantle. I did not dignify the question with an answer. At best, it is academic; at worst, mischievous.

Rather, it is more pertinent to ask whether the anointed successor is ready to take on what the incumbent has made a heavy responsibility. Heavy because Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad will leave a great legacy: a nation united, determined to stay on track for a fully developed status by 2020, notwithstanding that we face an economic slowdown.

When Dr Mahathir left Anwar in charge of the country for two whole months last year, it was obvious that he felt the time had come to ease his deputy into what is the country's most demanding office and ensure a smooth succession. Not surprisingly, after the two months, came the official endorsement for a job well done.

Quite timely if you ask me! Look at the problems Indonesia is facing, vis-a-vis the naming of President Suharto's successor for purposes of restoring international confidence in the Indonesian economy.

Not that Anwar would have faced the same reaction as Habibie. The international Press has, to date, afforded the former high regard - one not normally given to Third World leaders who are not heads of government and this he has retained throughout the past half year despite regional economic convulsions.

Herein lies the crux of his ability to govern: the economic convulsions. By sheer coincidence, the Deputy Prime Minister is also the Finance Minister - unusually so for Malaysia. And, as if by divine providence, he is being put to the most gruelling and arduous test. As Finance Minister, his office is pivotal to the country's recovery.

By all reasonable indicators, he seems to be navigating the economy towards calmer waters. Of course, it is early days yet but the gradual return of foreign funds to the stock market is a good omen indeed!

In recent remarks, he has made it clear that he concurs with the international economic community that what the country needs is greater transparency, the end of cronyism and the inculcation of a "free civil society." The last I take to mean greater democratic freedoms for you and me. What he resents, according to the newspapers, is the patronising nature of such advice.

These, I feel, are sincere statements from a man whose ethical probity is grounded in the strength of his faith in Islam, a religion that makes no apology for its unwavering insistence on justice and fair play, the two fundamentals that would not only guarantee economic growth but also social development.

Anwar, as his track record demonstrates, will not neglect the poor. If there are instances where actions attributed to him have not matched his words, it is his lieutenants who must bear the blame of inaptitude. I believe, too, that his current preoccupation with the economy will further hone a much-needed skill to ensure our continued economic prosperity.

Dr Mahathir's decision not to go to the International Monetary Fund with a begging bowl is wise. It is this wisdom that has given Anwar the flexibility to manoeuvre policies such that Malaysians will not suffer needlessly. We have all been able to celebrate the festive season reasonably well albeit a little low key but it was very becoming of a nation prepared for a period of self-imposed austerity.

I am sure, too, that there will be more pain to come before any gain can be achieved. For instance, the pain of corporate bankruptcies as the private sector begins paying for its profligacy. The Finance Minister must let it happen because keeping them afloat now is to sink the country's future. After all, bankruptcy is to capitalism what hell is to Islam - an essential built-in correcting mechanism, the former to make certain the creation of sound capitalists while the latter fosters the making of good Muslims.

If grappling with economic problems of the magnitude that Malaysia is now going through does not give Anwar the necessary credentials for governance, I do not know what will. This is the time for consolidating our past successes and laying the groundwork for future ones.

And, once Anwar is Prime Minister, he will need a Finance Minister of unimpeachable ability. For this, there can be only one tried and tested member of the present Cabinet - Rafidah Aziz.

One final observation not in any way meant to hurt or injure, and neither is it meant to be jocular or flippant. In my estimation, Dr Wan Azizah, like Dr Siti Hasmah, will do Malaysia proud. As a professional, she is a woman of substance. She is personable, friendly, unassuming and unpretentious. She will also put the nation in good stead in the Muslim world.

And, she epitomises Islamic modernity by the simple act of tying her headscarf smartly round her neck instead of allowing it to billow and flutter about her person. This is not only chic and flattering. More importantly, it lends the wearer a briskness and professionalism suited to a contemporary person always in the public eye.