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DPM too seasoned not to separate grain from chaff

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DATUK Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi has received many congratulatory messages on his recent appointment as the Deputy Prime Minister. Some of the messages are from people who say that the appointment has restored political stability to the country.

A number of the messages are from genuine well-wishers and friends but others are of the anticipatory remember-me type as a sort of political insurance.

In sum, the messages convey expressions of hope for the political future of Abdullah. For a politician who has tasted a period of political wilderness after being dropped from the cabinet and further exemplified by the absence of supporters to greet him on his return to Penang after failing to retain his position as Umno vice-president at a party election; the hundreds who greeted him at the same airport after regaining the vice-president post at a subsequent election; and the thousands who attended his Hari Raya open house in Kuala Lumpur and Penang recently, Abdullah is now too seasoned a politician not to separate the grain from the chaff in maintaining his true self and perspective.

The reactions to his appointment however, disclose signs of confusion on the part of the general public as to what the Deputy Prime Minister can or cannot do in his official capacity and more particularly the role of the DPM in the hierarchy of government.

As the title of the appointment suggests, the emphasis surely is on the word deputy thereby signifying a higher authority. The DPM deputises for the Prime Minister at functions and occasions at which the Prime Minister is unable to attend.

On occasion he presides over the weekly cabinet meeting when the Prime Minister is overseas. When the DPM speaks he actually articulates the views of the Prime Minister.

The exemplary DPM was undoubtedly the late Tun Abdul Razak who meticulously always gave the impression that he spoke on behalf of Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman or that of the Government as a whole.

Tun Ghaffar Baba was another DPM who played the role of the deputy to the letter in spirit and substance.

The role of the DPM was somewhat confused by the Press when Tan Sri Musa Hitam was the DPM. The Press had dubbed the Government then as the 2M Government, meaning a joint partnership between Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Musa. To be fair, Musa himself did not have any such illusions.

At a function at the Istana Negara soon after his appointment as DPM, I remarked to Musa that his songkok was a little askew. He retorted that was because he is only the deputy. In time however, Musa resigned from the Government on the ground that he could not accept Dr Mahathir's style of leadership.

Musa did the right thing in resigning because this is what our system of Government is all about. There can only be one leader at a time and that is the Prime Minister.

If a Cabinet Minister cannot agree with the Prime Minister, he has no choice but to resign honourably. It does not mean however, that the Prime Minister himself is irremovable.

If a Prime Minister has lost his bearings or his leadership is injurious to the country or the party and there is sufficient party support for his

removal, he can be dumped at any time.

This is what happened to British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher when her Conservative Party decided that she had become a liability to the party's fortunes at the general election.

Abdullah's real executive power is that of Home Minister where he has his own ministry with powers conferred by law in respect of the several departments of the ministry.

In the current administration it can be fairly described that Abdullah is the Home Minister with the added rank of Deputy Prime Minister.

The DPM can only show his true colours when he becomes the Prime Minister. Only then may he initiate his own policies and exercise his personal style of government. Above all as the DPM he has no competing executive powers with the Prime Minister.

Until the DPM becomes the Prime Minister he is at best only a safety valve of the Prime Minister. To all those who have congratulated Abdullah on his appointment as the DPM be best reminded that he is only a deputy of Dr Mahathir, the one and only Head of the present Government.

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