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Dr M - a genius in art of the possible

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POLITICS is the art of the possible. When Umno celebrated its 50th anniversary not long ago, it was acclaimed that the party will continue to exist and prosper for another 100 years.

By a sudden turn of events, however, it seemed that Umno might not last the 20th century.

The party, and hence the country, were in a state of political uncertainty bordering on political instability.

The situation was initially triggered by the economic downturn in July 1997, then influenced by the political upheavals in Indonesia in May 1998, made worse by the alleged discontent of the masses in the foreign Press; and finally culminating in the removal of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim from government and party posts in September 1998.

A ground swell had developed against the Umno leadership and even against the Government.

Umno members were confused and some were angry at the sudden fall from grace of Anwar, their idol for the last 16 years.

Unlike 1988, when there was a mass exodus of the Umno membership to Semangat 46, this time around there was no breakaway at all, thus creating a deadly silence of the majority.

Umno is battle-scarred and has survived one crisis after another.

It lost some ground in the May 1969 general election which led to racial riots. The only issue at that election was corruption.

Then in the early 1980s there was the constitutional crisis involving the Malay Rulers.

This was followed by the recession of the mid 1980s when word went round that the only way to solve the economic crisis was to get rid of Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad as Prime Minister.

His leadership was indeed challenged in 1987 and in the aftermath, Umno was declared an illegal organisation by the High Court in 1988.

During the 17 years he has been Prime Minister, Dr Mahathir has appointed and lost three deputies, namely Tan Sri Musa Hitam, Tun Ghafar Baba and Anwar.

Until last week, the country was without a Deputy Prime Minister after the dismissal of Anwar on Sept 2, 1998 which it was said was the continuing cause of political uncertainty and a disincentive to economic recovery.

As Prime Minister, Dr Mahathir was under mounting pressure to fill the vacant post of Deputy Prime Minister.

As president of Umno, he wanted the Umno membership to elect the deputy president, who by tradition would be appointed Deputy Prime Minister.

Which should come first? To appoint a Deputy Prime Minister ahead of the party elections would be considered as some sort of fait accompli for the incumbent at the election.

A tricky political situation indeed!

Enter Dr Mahathir the Visionary.

Whilst Umno delegates at the special general assembly on Dec 13, 1998 focused attention on the abolition of bonus votes for the office of president and deputy president on the agenda to amend the party constitution, there was an amendment which enabled party elections to be postponed by 18 months which was passed without debate.

Last Friday, Dr Mahathir took advantage of the amendment and announced

that party elections scheduled for June 1999 were postponed to the year 2000 until after the general election due by April 2000.

In one full swoop, he neutralised internal party rivalry which was already simmering for the June elections but retained the right of the membership to elect the deputy president by not appointing anyone to that office.

He called upon the party membership instead to gear itself for the general election, it being the higher priority of the party.

He then proceeded to appoint Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi as Deputy Prime Minister and effectively silenced any intended challenge to that office for the next 18 months.

In appointing Abdullah, who is second vice-president, he passed over Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak, the first vice-president.

There is a precedent for this. When Dr Mahathir himself was appointed Deputy Prime Minister he was third vice-president and superseded the first and second vice-president, namely Ghafar and Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah.

With Abdullah's appointment, political stability and certainty has been restored as evident by renewed confidence in the stock market.

With politicking in suspended animation party-wise, full attention can now be diverted to economic recovery.

Umno has survived another crisis and the country can breathe again.

Whether one likes or dislikes Dr Mahathir, it must be conceded that he is a political genius and is living proof that politics is the art of the possible.

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