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A `tradition' that is not really binding

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A VICE-PRESIDENCY is a springboard or stepping stone to higher office. The Deputy Prime Minister is a heartbeat away from the Prime Minister.

We have had four Prime Ministers. Only Tun Razak's heartbeat stopped while in office. We are lucky in the sense that the death of a PM in mid-term has happened only once. In the United States, the death of a president in office has happened all too often.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad was quoted in Utusan Malaysia yesterday that his present term would be his last. Be that as it may, it has fuelled fresh interest in Umno vice-presidents.

Disraeli once said, "With words we govern men."

Some politicians and even one or two political parties are in cloud-cuckoo-land or dream world, an area of unrealistic expectations and rather foolish behaviour.

Whether they like it or not, one or two are destined to rendezvous with disappointment and despair.

Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz had suggested that Umno do away with vice-presidents - that it is more than sufficient to have only a deputy president. When the deputy president moves up the ladder, it should not be mandatory that the prime minister must choose one of the vice-presidents as his deputy. It could come from any one of the Supreme Council members.

I think the present Umno constitution is good and should be maintained.

In 1970, Tun Razak did not choose any of the three vice-presidents - Encik Ghafar Baba, Tan Sri Sardon Zubir and Encik Khir Johari. Instead, he made Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman deputy prime minister although he was only a member of the Supreme Council.

Tun Razak's first choice was Khir Johari. However, he was persuaded by his advisers to choose Tun Dr Ismail because he was considered a more appropriate candidate - a year after the May 13, 1969, race riots.

Tun Dr Ismail had rejoined the Government to help deal with the trouble. He did an excellent job.

There never was a tradition that a vice-president must succeed the deputy president. Indeed, only two out of 24 had become prime minister and six deputy prime minister and deputy president. The rest just faded away.

The British Government's fatal mistake was to force the Malayan Union on the Malays. The generally pro-British Malays at once became disenchanted with the British. And Umno started campaigning for early independence.

As John Cloake wrote in his book *Templar - Tiger of Malaya*, "The Malayan Union was a blunder", and "a new constitution cooked up in Whitehall", without consultation and "without any but a cynically superficial concern for the position of the rulers."

The contest for vice-presidents was and is unbelievably expensive and intense as if it was a do-or-die battle, simply because winners believe the position is an open door to the coveted posts of deputy prime minister and prime minister which is strictly not true. For sure, the winners have a definite advantage.

Umno never had the post of vice-president until 1949 and the first holder was a British-trained barrister, Datuk Panglima Bukit Gantang Haji Abdul Wahab, the British-appointed Menteri Besar of Perak.

In March 1976, Datuk Hussein Onn, the new prime minister (he succeeded Tun Razak who suddenly died of leukaemia in January in London) wanted to appoint an extremely unpopular man, Tan Sri Ghazali Shafie, as his deputy.

Datuk Hussein had to back down following strong pressures from the three vice-presidents of Umno - Encik Ghafar Baba, Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah and Dr Mahathir Mohamad and other influential people including those in the civil service. He was the minister of Home Affairs and a member of the Umno Supreme Council. Dr Mahathir was chosen instead.

I should remind the young, new Umno members and leaders that there was only an "understanding" which became a "tradition" that a vice-president of Umno would automatically become deputy president and Deputy Prime Minister once the deputy president and Deputy Prime Minister moves up the ladder. So it is not a binding precedent.

I was involved in pressuring Datuk (as he was then) Hussein and paid a high price for it - but that is another story.

During the last Umno election, nine persons contested for the three vice-presidential posts. I shall, however, only write about the six losers.

Datuk Abdul Ghani Osman, the Menteri Besar of Johor, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin's successor, fared badly because he trusted and allied himself with the wrong people. Besides Ghani, to many people, is cold and distant.

Datuk Syed Hamid Albar. The majority of Umno members told me they were and are still wondering why he was running in view of the fact that Johor had two other candidates, Ghani and Muhyiddin. Albar has good credentials. However, in the company of the other two, he did not make it.

Muhyiddin won against all odds, as did Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib, an incumbent without a government position.

Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak, was from the start, a sure winner, and polled impressively.

Datuk Dr Rais Yatim, though articulate in English as well as Bahasa, failed in his fourth attempt. His home base (Negri Sembilan) was and is latently divided and fractious. He has a sharp mind which sometimes is a disadvantage in a super-sensitive society and environment.

Tan Sri Mohd Isa Samad lacks charisma though he has a big war chest. He has governed Negri Sembilan, according to some people, rather well.

Datuk Sri Panglima Osu Sukam, the Chief Minister of Sabah, would have been the first vice-president from the new territory of Sabah had his "allies" delivered their part of the bargain. In the event, he performed very well.

Datuk Seri Abu Hassan Omar, the Menteri Besar of Selangor, even to his own supporters, is considered one of the dullest of senior Umno politicians. Though Selangor packs political clout, he failed to make a good impression.

As I write this, my memory raced back to those early days of the Malayan Union, the British Military Administration and the arrival of the British bully, Sir Harold MacMichael, the architect of Malayan Union.

Though Umno membership is based on race as are MCA and MIC, it is multi-racial in its policy because it teaches tolerance towards non-Bumiputera Malaysians and adheres to the spirit of live and let live.

A vice-president of Umno need not end up being deputy prime minister or prime minister. Tun Razak had created a precedent.

The message from the people to the government is, be tough against the Islamic deviants, cultists and what have you who have manipulated Islam and will do so in future to justify the Devil's work.

Forget for the time being next year's Umno divisional election and the presidential election in 2003. Instead, concentrate on the efforts to regain the confidence of the people, and more importantly, that of the young Malaysians.

In May 1996, Umno made a declaration that the party faced many internal and external challenges which if not handled properly, could result in

declining support and erosion of its power. It occurred three years after that declaration. Make amends with haste, otherwise we may be out in the midday sun sooner than we think.

Datuk Seri Abdullah Badawi bears the highest reputation in the Umno leadership. Dr Mahathir, when he was choosing him as his deputy must have considered that Abdullah would add positive strength to him. Dr Mahathir could hardly have chosen a better candidate.

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