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Policy, not personality in Umno polls

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THEY were giants in those days. Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra, Tun Abdul Razak Hussein, Tun Ismail Abdul Rahman and Datuk Onn Jaafar.

Tunku, the Father of the Nation, commanded formidable authority and yet remained approachable; Razak was intelligent, a workaholic, an outstanding administrator and an artful politician; Ismail was a man of undisputed integrity; and Onn, one with the foresight to mobilise latent Malay nationalism.

Onn's later flaws denied him what was his: to found the Malayan nation. His British collaborators transformed him from a nationalist into an impetuous politician. He was ahead of his time.

Twenty years on, the dominance of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, both in the party and the Government, is amazing and for good reason: courageous, firm, confident, competent and visionary.

As a leader, Dr Mahathir is loved or disliked depending on who you talk to - he is a hero to many and not to others. He wrote as a student, became a doctor, and then a Member of Parliament in 1964. He has not been out of politics since.

Dr Mahathir and Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew are two contemporary Asian leaders whom we can speak of in terms of greatness. Asean, in my view, has produced in them two statesmen without equal today.

Between munching freshly-cut chilled mango and dishing out a torrent of instructions to his subordinates, a mega-rich entrepreneur said to me as my eyes surveyed his spartan office suite:

"You know that the Prime Minister is not only intelligent but also generally has good insight and innovation. (He also volunteered his views on the Prime Minister's weaknesses but that is another story). I do not and will not deny I am one of his cronies. What's wrong with cronyism? Cronies exist in ancient and modern history. I know for sure Dr Mahathir is not Marcos.

"I could not have implemented one-third of my ideas and projects which are benefitting the nation if we have a Prime Minister who does not read, who is unintelligent ... and not forward-looking.

"His economic plan, ably executed by Tun Daim Zainuddin, has worked. As you know, his experience even in foreign affairs, technology and information technology is unmatched by those around him. Of course, Daim and Abdullah (Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi) are good lieutenants. Some of his detractors read but do not, I believe, read books."

As of yesterday, Dr Mahathir had 78 nominations, 28 above the number which qualifies him to defend his post as Umno's fifth president in the presidential election on May 11. The Umno election is held once every three years.

It also seems, judging by the strong support, that it will not altogether surprise me if Dr Mahathir and Abdullah (who by securing 78 nominations has well surpassed the 33 required to contest Umno's number two post) will be elected by acclamation.

So far, 79 of 165 Umno divisions have held their meetings to elect their delegates to the general assembly.

Umno has three vice-presidents, vice heirs to the heir (deputy president) and candidates for vice-presidency must have 17 nominations to qualify. Two candidates are well past the mark - incumbent Datuk Seri

Najib Tun Razak and first timer, Datuk Abdul Ghani Othman, the Menteri Besar of Johor.

Two others - Datuk Seri Abu Hassan Omar, Menteri Besar of Selangor and Datuk Seri Osu Sukam, Chief Minister of Sabah have already obtained enough nominations to run, while Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar has received 13 nominations - four short of the 17 required.

Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, a former vice president, alleged that he had proof of attempts to block his nomination for an Umno vice president's post. He met Dr Mahathir and subsequently it was stated that his complaint had been settled. It is difficult to prove allegations of that nature unless of course the operators are amateurs. Besides, such allegations have become the norm over the years.

Umno is and has always been a democratic and mass movement. I know for sure - and I am talking from personal experience, having led an Umno division for nearly two decades - that no one could force anyone, much less a division as powerful as Johor Baru, to do what the delegates do not want to do. The Umno Constitution also does not permit force.

In politics as in diplomacy, it is not easy to persuade people to collude with you, and if it occurs, few people are told about it because such collusion is a risky, even defensible, policy.

When Tun Razak indicated to me that Tun Ghafar Baba, Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah and Dr Mahathir - in that order - should be elected as vice presidents in the crucial 1975 Umno presidential election, no divisions were compelled not to nominate anyone else.

On the contrary, as many candidates as possible were encouraged to run. There were seven or eight candidates altogether, I think. One withdrew at the right time - the loyal Tan Sri Ghazali Jawi, an Umno stalwart and Menteri Besar of Perak - at my behest to ensure that the majority of Perak's delegate votes would go to the three preferred candidates. Then as now, Perak is a powerhouse in Umno's politics.

What I did was to highlight in Tun Razak's presidential speech, which I wrote, "the profound contributions of the three favoured candidates to the party and the Government, and of their potential".

They won as I expected and Razak was delighted. He confided in me as to why Dr Mahathir must win. For my effort I paid a high price after Tun Razak died on January 14, 1976. I was detained under the Internal Security Act for five years in spite of stout defence by allies in the Umno Supreme Council meeting in Penang.

Although I was a member of the Supreme Council, I was barred from attending the meeting by the president of the party, Datuk (later Tun) Hussein Onn, because he said the council would be discussing "communist infiltration at the highest level of Government and Umno".

Dr Mahathir, Ghafar, Musa Hitam and Syed Nasir Ismail defended me to no avail. Many Supreme Council members stayed neutral but "Ghulam's" allies, the ultra rightists and McCarthy inspired-witch hunters won. I became a victim of political vendetta. Thus began a macabre story; they were not even Machiavellians.

Abdullah Majid, Deputy Minister of Labour and I were arrested on Nov 1, 1976 soon after the Umno Supreme Council meeting in Georgetown. Abdullah is today in his seventies, and had suffered a stroke a few years ago which left him unable to walk and speak. I last visited him in January at his house in south Kuala Lumpur.

The May 11 poll, the real election in Malaysia as some insist, is not causing any nervousness because the results are predictable. Indeed, people are showing little interest. The economy is recovering as well as it can under the circumstances, which helps the incumbents considerably. No pragmatic Umno division, which puts party unity above anything else,

wants a divided party which will be the case if there are contests for the top two posts. Loyal Umno members value solidarity and continuity. The bitter 1987 experience is still fresh in their minds. That year Razaleigh narrowly lost (47 votes) to Dr Mahathir. He left Umno in a fit of petulance with his supporters to form a breakaway party - Semangat 46. But after being continually snubbed by PAS - his partner - he returned to Umno in 1996.

In any event, the majority of Umno members have accepted the fact that the leadership succession has been set in motion and they will not take too kindly to those who want to upset the agreed arrangement. Whoever challenges Dr Mahathir or his chosen successor, no matter how nationally known they are, will have to take on the most formidable election machine in the nation.

"This is not an ego trip. Umno's unity and the party's survival is at stake," said a senior Umno Supreme Council member to me when I met him at his office a week ago. Frankly, I do not believe anyone will come forward and state unequivocally that he wants Dr Mahathir's or Abdullah's job. And serious candidates should state their intentions clearly and openly. In any case, I do not believe any challenger will get the required 50 nominations, even 33. I have been counting and recounting - the numbers just will not add up because most divisions will follow the advice of the Supreme Council. Unless, which is unlikely, something extraordinary happens before April 1.

Dr Mahathir has played the leadership game by the Umno book. Those who want to take him or Abdullah on, must first burnish their credentials and raise their credibility.

What matters is not personality but policies. Dr Mahathir has been dominant in Malaysian politics for so long precisely because his policies are practical and sound. The selective capital controls, for example, have worked well and have maintained national solidarity, lessened social polarisation and consequently reduced political risks.

The aspiring opponents of Dr Mahathir and Abdullah have once again miscalculated. If their electoral appeal and future prospects in the party have been weakened, they have only themselves to blame.