

17/01/2000

Umno wars of succession

Abdullah Ahmad

ANCIENT and modern history is full of examples of extraordinary fathers who sired extraordinary sons and daughters. Lord Randolph Churchill sired Winston; Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi; Solomon, Bandaranaike Kumaratunga; Joseph Kennedy, John Kennedy; Lee Kuan Yew, Hsien Loong; Sukarno, Megawati Sukarnoputri and Datuk Onn Jaafar, Hussein.

In some cases, as in Datuk Seri Najib, Datuk Hishamuddin and Mokhzani, to name only three, they might have been great successes on their own, but they do owe much to their dads' names which are well-known.

But in some cases, the fathers' influence on their sons, like that of Joseph Kennedy over John Kennedy and Leopold Mozart on Amadeus, were telling and very deliberate. Joseph Kennedy Sr began carefully grooming his second son, John, for the American presidency of the US after his eldest son, Joseph Jr, was killed in World War II. Leopold Mozart systematically exhibited perhaps even exploited his son's musical talents without which we might not have the pleasure of enjoying Mozart's genius.

Mozart came to epitomise classical music in its purity of form and melody. Mozart played a significant role in the development of the symphony, as did Beethoven, Haydn and Schubert. Sometimes the influence was inadvertent, as with Tun Razak, whose leukaemia cut short a glorious premiership, leaving his oldest son, Najib, struggling to equal his many accomplishments.

The greatest prize in a war or an election is for the victor to write its history. Imagine, had Japan won World War II, what versions we would be reading or imagine, had Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah won the 1987 Umno presidential election, what type of Malaysia we would be living in!

The Umno Supreme Council has suggested or decided, if you will, there would be no contest for the two top posts in the party which leaves only the three vice presidents' posts and supreme councillors on offer in the May election. The Umno president, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, himself had said that it was up to Umno divisions whether to heed the Supreme Council's advice. Whatever, it will be very rapacious proceedings.

It will be a battle royal of unimaginable consequences over who should succeed Datuk Seri Abdullah Badawi. The contest for supreme councillors will be less than a thriller, it will be hard-fought though the results are predictable. There are few candidates for vice presidents many Umno watchers consider outstanding. No giants, even potential ones.

An Umno old hand, using his cellular phone, called to tell me this: "Dollah, the giants have vanished from the political scene - there is now guided democracy in the party." Whatever, my advice for the would-be candidates is: the finest way to die (politically) is after the excitement of fighting an Umno election. Examples: Tengku Razaleigh, Tan Sri Musa Hitam and a few others.

I try hard from Big Apple to glance at today's political horizon in Malaysia, in Umno in particular. Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra brought us independence, Tun Razak gave the Malays and Malaysia a new beginning, Tun Hussein Onn carried it on. Dr Mahathir vigorously enlarged what Razak started, and he is doing a fine job. He is in great health.

To be a great man, one must achieve something definite and Dr Mahathir has. Like the US Federal Reserve chairman, Mr Alan Greenspan, Dr Mahathir is also 73 years old, and both have won a new vote of confidence for their

"wise and steady leadership". Dr Mahathir has transformed the nation from the wretched dark days to an astonishing economic growth which has created the biggest middle class in Association of South-East Asian Nations, and the pinnacle of success awaits Malaysia.

Razak's sudden death on January 14 1976 changed the Malaysian political picture. It became a murky, deformed and debased place as a result of Ghulam's unfretted power and intrigues which, in the end, fortunately for Malaysians, brought him nowhere. I must confess I don't ever want to relive those years. They were cruel, ruthless, barbarous and degrading. Dr Mahathir changed all that by liberalising the nation. Mohamad, Dr Mahathir's father, a headmaster, was not a well-known teacher nationally, but he did the nation an immense service.

He personally supervised Dr Mahathir's upbringing and early education and handed on to him the aspiration to be fair, teach him to fight for independence, respect human rights, and rid the nation of fear and want. I am sure the headmaster had a great influence on his son - he welcomed back Umno leaders and members who were witch-hunted and jailed by Ghulam and even those who fought bitterly against him in 1987 - Razaleigh, Musa, Abdullah, Datuk Rais Yatim, Datuk Kadir Sheikh Fadzir and many others.

It does seem that Abdullah, all being well, will succeed Dr Mahathir when he finally leaves the political scene, To be fair, one cannot judge Abdullah until he takes over the leadership. Abdullah only needs to remember that success contains within it the germs of failure, and the reverse is also true. He knows the latter well enough. He is very determined to become a prime minister, and Abdullah has something going for him to fulfil his ambition.

That settled. Who then do we have in the third echelon? Najib, Datuk Abdul Ghani Othman, Rais Yatim, Datuk Panglima Osu Sukam, Datuk Seri Tajul Rosli, Tan Sri Khalil Yaakub and Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar. They are not much younger than Abdullah except for Najib, Osu and Ghani. The previous steady condition of Umno politics has been a boon to several of these politicians but situations have changed and are shifting. In a broad context it should not be easy for most to do well than in the past. Put another way, if the top posts were contested, these personalities would be valued higher than they are worth.

All the persons I have listed are acceptable, one or two are even well-liked in some quarters. What Umno needs is a young understudy for Abdullah, because I believe, Dr Mahathir is in for a long period. By the time Abdullah succeeds Dr Mahathir he will be in mid or late sixties himself. He would need someone as his deputy who should be as contemporary as he could be.

Soon after the Y2K Cabinet line-up was announced, I wrote in this newspaper who, in my opinion, should be seriously considered as one of the vice presidents - Hishamuddin. He appears to be the best qualified to face the next wave.

Young, resolute, perceived as clean, reasonable, able even personable. More importantly, he will not be an overly well-scripted candidate, unlike his immediate predecessor in Pemuda, Datuk Zahid Hamidi.

Following the general elections, the Johor and Sabah Umno, even Negeri Sembilan and Malacca Umno, seemed to have been pleased with themselves and with good reason. I know a few Umno personalities who are not altogether in high spirit following their extremely poor performances. But who can they blame except themselves? One or two have developed dangerous delusions of power - insane assumptions that they were adored and more influential than they really were.

If Hishamuddin stands, and I hope he does, he will cancel out Syed Hamid and Ghani. Both should step aside for Hishamuddin who has a better chance

than either to achieve the ultimate political prize in Malaysian politics.

If Hishamuddin declines, which is a shame, Johor Umno must decide it is either Ghani or Syed Hamid. I say neither should stand. Hishamuddin is a sure winner. There is no guarantee either Ghani or Syed Hamid will win. I reckon the early favourites are Hishamuddin, Osu and Najib.

Hishamuddin and Najib are first cousins and sons of former prime ministers. The great advantage Hishamuddin has over Najib is that he is younger, newer and hails from Johor, the Umno heartland, which ensures he is unlikely to be beaten in the 11th general elections.

Osu is Sabah Umno's chieftain, a safe candidate who would not pose much of a threat to either Hishamuddin or Najib in the run-up selection to succeed Abdullah. Hitherto, Osu has displayed no ambition to be more than what he is. To be fair, nor has he disowned such an expectation. Like in love and war, all is fair in politics.

The leadership of Umno Youth can be handed over to one of the leading members of the present Umno Youth Central Executive Committee who ideally should be younger than Hishamuddin. This must be done if Umno is serious about capturing the imagination of Malay Youths and university students. The top Umno leadership and Pemuda should be acutely aware of this for future electoral victory.

The long-term survival of Umno will depend on the rush of the technological and communications advances which would eventually intrude into Umno policy-making calculations. As in the American presidential election 2000, the prime issue will be education because we are in the information age where knowledge-based economy rules supremely.

A serious consideration should be given to this possibility by the Pemuda: not to make demand on Hishamuddin, instead to strongly support him to bid for one of the three vice presidents as his dad did successfully soon after he rejoined Umno in 1969.

Hishamuddin is the vice-president-to-be, and his mentor, I know, will quietly support him.

Politics is always fascinating, often provocative, even more so in Umno's in-fighting and elections. Expect intriguing details and unexpected insights to emerge during the Umno wars of succession.

* The writer is Malaysia's special envoy to the United Nations.

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