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Why deputy presidency must be contested

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DR Mahathir's reported insistence that the Umno supreme council's stand to return him unopposed as president and confine the choice of deputy president to only the Deputy Prime Minister, as being merely an advice and not a directive, indicates a prudence not shared by other members of the council.

The pretext of unity, as reason enough to suspend party democracy and all its attendant negative consequences, comes a little too late. The party should have been united when facing the country at the general election.

That the same is not as necessary when facing itself, is easily fathomed by a simple analogy to individual introspection.

But like the introspective individual, the party cannot tear itself apart with overindulgence. This, the Prime Minister cautions, in the event the council's advice is not accepted and he urges the same restraint to be exercised by those vying for the party's vice-presidencies.

It is not difficult to imagine the reason for the council's decision to honour him thus. It is befitting the stature of one who has so lifted the nation's prestige in the eyes of the world. He has made us proud to be Malaysian. That Malaysia's progress is so singularly associated with him is testimony to his achievement.

Despite Umno's recent electoral setback and the inference of its failure, Dr Mahathir has done for the Malays an immense service, carrying on where the other Prime Ministers left off: to bring economic and social upliftment to the Bumiputeras. Where once there were only poor Malays there are now millionaires.

Ironically, a point not missed by the Prime Minister, the slap in Umno's face at the last general election is the ruing of this very success. Whether perceived as flawed or perfect, success it is.

Therefore, to honour him by continuing to entrust to him the party and the country seems apt. Yet, his very legacy it is that signals the need to be wary of possible impetuous decisions at these highest levels.

It might not be as fitting to hand over the vacant position of Umno deputy president to whomsoever, without contest. This party position is effectively that of the Prime Minister-in-waiting, a situation more true today than ever before.

The Prime Minister himself has admitted that this will, in all probability, be his last term in office. He has said that in time age must catch up with him and infirmity will set in. Given his relatively advanced years this will happen sooner rather than later.

When that happens the Prime Minister-in-waiting, Umno's deputy president, will take over. And, that which he or she inherits is a country which is being catapulted into the very frontiers of progress, frontiers where success depends on the ability to command intellect and knowledge-dependent bleeding edge technologies, in the face of a conservative backlash.

Dr Mahathir has risked the wrath of his fellow citizens and the heckling of the West by redefining democracy to ensure better control of an arguably wayward populace so that economic development may be unhampered. Will his successor have the same courage of conviction?

He braved the criticism of the voters with so-called mega projects such as the Kuala Lumpur International Airport and the Multimedia Super

Corridor to give Malaysia an edge. Will his successor have the political will to do the same?

Where he had taken the bull by the horns, slapping on the unpopular selective capital controls, and risked the ire of the International Monetary Fund by loudly blaming neo-imperialism for the currency crisis and the ensuing economic recession, will his successor dare push the limits of probability and save the country much unnecessary grief?

If the Prime Minister's suspicion is correct, another similar onslaught on the country is not improbable. As the currency crisis has shown, economic theories alone may not be enough. Under such circumstances can the people depend on his successor to have the wherewithal to take novel and unusual measures to secure the country's continued prosperity and stability?

Can his successor confront Islamic conservatism as Dr Mahathir did, through scholastic debate? Or, will his successor feel unable to tear away from a religious conditioning that too closely resembles conservatism and tether the Muslim community to the yoke of tradition?

Some have argued that the time has come for the country to desist from grand visions and opt for the slower, more leisurely pace of realism. Instead of focusing on economic growth alone, leaving spiritual development to its own devices, what is needed is a successor who could almost be the antithesis of the incumbent. Why has ambition and aspiration become so divorced from spirituality in some minds?

If Malaysia could afford an idyllic stroll through its reality, the May 13 episode would not have happened. However, it did, replete with murder and mayhem, looting and larceny.

How then can anyone imagine, most especially the handful, or so, men and women who hold a nation's fate in their hands, that to keep a political party intact is more important than to allow the greatest probability of the surfacing of the most able successor to happen.

Yes, it is right that we honour the Prime Minister by allowing him the grace to decide when he has had enough of us. No, the party cannot surely agree to leave the choice of who shall be the Prime Minister-in-waiting to such a small body of persons, no matter how able.

To cut a long story short, what the supreme council has done is to put its own interests before that of the nation's. That is nothing less than a dereliction of duty.

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