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Presidential premiership irreversible

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MALAYSIA, like the United Kingdom, is a constitutional monarchy and parliamentary democracy since 1957 with the Yang di-Pertuan Agong (King) and a parliament with two Houses: Dewan Rakyat (House of Representatives) and Dewan Negara (Senate) whose members are appointed by the King and others elected by the State Assemblies.

Supreme legislative power is vested in the Dewan Rakyat whose 193 members are elected in a general election once every five years unless the King, on the advice of the Prime Minister, dissolves it sooner.

The Senate's main function is to revise (I never recall anything like that) but always to approve whatever legislation has been passed by the Lower House.

The executive power of the King is exercised by the Cabinet or Jemaah Menteri headed by the Prime Minister.

The King yesterday opened a new session of Parliament. I have been out of the House for a good 10 years now. Do I miss it? Yes and no.

No one seriously denies that the authority and importance (and self-importance) of the Dewan Rakyat has diminished considerably. I hasten to add it is also the case in many other democracies.

Why? How the presidential premiership came about and whether it is a permanent feature or affliction should make good reading.

There is the old-school prime minister, represented by Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Alhaj, the founding father of Malaysia, and the transitional figure of Tun Hussein Onn.

The new-style prime minister was started by Tun Razak who partially adopted the presidential system.

The irony is that the Tunku, who found lengthy Cabinet and Umno Supreme Council meetings boring and a wasteful diversion, granted Parliament the time it wanted and deserved, and as a result Parliament during his (political) life and times was lively, robust, a real debating forum and engaging.

It sat from morning and often late into the night, just like the House of Commons, though the sittings were less frequent.

The Tunku spent a lot of time in the Dewan Rakyat and appeared to have really enjoyed being there, particularly during the Prime Minister's question time and he regularly voted in the Dewan Rakyat divisions.

For a young media person-cum-politician like me then, young civil servants and party officials, it was an enjoyable time, a good experience and learning process.

When I became Tun Razak's political secretary in October 1963, I began a mixed career of being a politician-cum-media person-and-civil servant because Tun Razak, then Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Defence and Rural Development, and a sometime Foreign Minister, had contrived the post as far as I was concerned (at least) to blur the distinction between the traditional role of the civil servant and that of the political adviser (a commissar as some civil servants described it with undisguised disdain).

But in the end we co-existed pretty well, each to his own, and began to adhere to the principle of survival of the fittest.

I must record here that I never experienced any difficulty working with my contemporaries in the civil service, such as Abdul Aziz Hussein, Abdul Aziz Wahab, Nik Hashim Yusof, Shafie Yahya among others, or my seniors like Thong Yaw Hong, Robeless, Ahmad Omar, Ishak Tadin, Jack De Silva,

Zainal Sulong, Zain Azraai, Ya'acob Hitam, Nik Daud Nik Mat, Abdul Kadir Shamsuddin (later Chief Secretary to the Government), Gen Tunku Osman Jewa, Gen Abdul Hamid Bidin, Inspectors-General of Police Claude Fenner, Saleh Ismail, Abdul Rahman Hashim, and Hanif Omar, and many others, including in the judiciary and legal services and state government civil servants.

There were, of course, a few bad apples, none of whom became men of consequence.

Tun Razak was the first minister to have a political secretary followed by Khir Johari (now Tan Sri). Today, the political staff in each ministry has increased and in the case of the Prime Minister's Department, I think, the number has trebled or more.

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad was, I should think, the best Umno backbencher between 1964 and 1969. He spoke, almost always in English, and very well. His speeches were always biting but never dull.

His address when tabling the motion of thanks for the Royal Address in 1965, to which Lee Kuan Yew proposed an amendment, and the ensuing debates were some of the best I ever heard in the Dewan Rakyat which I had been covering since 1957 in one capacity or other.

Now, as Prime Minister, Dr Mahathir spends less time in the Dewan Rakyat and how I wish he would devote more time to answering parliamentary questions.

He is eloquent and commanding and therefore very effective. He should confront the Opposition - the way he did in the 1960s and lead the way for his colleagues to counter the attacks by the Opposition - some of which are seen to be very damaging to the Government, Umno and its coalition partners. Indeed, a few are potentially very dangerous.

It was Tun Razak, and not Dr Mahathir, who started the presidential premiership. It was Dr Mahathir who enlarged it.

Though Tun Razak did consult his Cabinet and the Umno Supreme Council, most of the decisions were in fact made by the then powerful Umno Political Committee (the standing committee of the Supreme Council) and by his concentric and intimate circles of confidants and advisers. The advisers and confidants, in turn, had their own clans and supporters.

The question to ponder is whether this apparent declension of the theory and practice of Cabinet government is fundamental and permanent. I think there is no turning back.

It is an irreversible phenomenon. The presidential premiership is a political necessity given the growing maze of governmental, NGO, semi-governmental and political organisations and patronage.

The power of a modern prime minister, like that of the US president, is immense. He can be autocratic, he can also be democratic, always looking for consensus (and achieving little).

The power of the prime ministers of Malaysia and Singapore, and Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew, is awesome, not only over their colleagues but also over their respective peoples.

The role of the Opposition in Parliament is not merely to oppose for the sake of opposing - it implies the responsibility to oppose with patriotic motives. Sad to say, the Opposition seems to oppose everything the Government does. I will be the first to admit that this Government is not perfect, but then, which government is? Labour in Britain, Likud in Israel or the Republican in the US?

The Opposition parties, like the parties in power, are deemed to be loyal but feel that, and this is understandable, the interests of the nation will be served better by different policies.

But must it not wait for the next election, rather than pursuing policies which aim at destabilising the Government, come what may?

In Britain, the party (UK is a three-party nation) out of power is called "Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition" and when either Prince Charles or Prince William ascends the British throne, it becomes "His Majesty's Loyal Opposition".

I very well know, especially in a maturing democracy like ours, it is never easy to do what I am urging because the duty of the Opposition as perceived by many people (wrongly) is to oppose, and not to co-operate. It is not the duty of the Opposition to oppose everything and support nothing.

I do not believe the majority of the voters who voted Pas, DAP and Keadilan want their leaders in the Dewan Rakyat merely to obstruct the Government.

I look forward to the day when the Opposition will wake up one morning and support the Government's efforts to integrate Malaysians of various races into a Bangsa Malaysia.

We must integrate our schools, the civil service and the private sector to increase competitiveness, efficiency, productivity and unity.

Do not be like a certain American rural politician from a small town who said he did not know yet what to do - he was waiting to see what the Government was doing so that he could take the other side!

I have gone on living as best I could as a has-been politician, writing articles on the side.

I still work to get a little money to live as I please, and what pleases me is to read, travel and write - and not to oppose unless absolutely necessary, which I do often, but in private, to those who matter or think they do.

Dewan Rakyat and the "Loyal" Opposition have been shaped by political factors and the personality of the Leader of the House and the Leader of the Opposition.

It is what Dr Mahathir and the Leader of the Opposition, Datuk Fadzil Noor make of it. And the best way to study the current and the future development of the parliamentary system of government in Malaysia is by reading the biographies and (in their absence) the speeches of Dr Mahathir and Fadzil Noor.

In the case of the latter, it will also help to read his printed speeches and watch the video tapes - easily available - also of Haji Hadi Awang (Menteri Besar of Terengganu and Pas deputy president) and, more importantly, that of the party's spiritual leader, Tok Guru Datuk Haji Nik Abdul bin Nik Mat who has been Menteri Besar of Kelantan since 1990.

We have had four prime ministers but more leaders of the Opposition! What a pity there has been no book (even if it is a light one) until now devoted exclusively to recording their characters, actions, achievements and - in the case of the Opposition leaders - their failures in the Dewan Rakyat.

In politics everywhere, watch carefully a president's or prime minister's Cabinet appointments. Many of them owe more to loyalty or political expediency than to proven ability. When he excludes strong and able colleagues it shows how strong (or otherwise) could be his sense of security or wisdom.

Ideally, he should choose the best - but then isn't he a politician?

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