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Twenty years on, and still irreplaceable

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THE year 1963 was a memorable one for Malaya and me, personally. Malaya was enlarged to become Malaysia and I became the nation's first political secretary at the age of 26.

The Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Defence and Minister of Rural Development, Tun Razak Hussein, an enlightened nationalist, was a great favourite of the Malays and the civil service. He made me his "eyes and ears", which was to last until he suddenly died on January 14 1976, after being PM barely five years.

Some of my early assignments were to accompany him on an unannounced visit to Teluk Anson (Teluk Intan), to attend a UN conference in Bangkok and to visit Alor Star on my own to make contacts with Kedah's Umno Young Turks.

One evening, towards the end of the year, barely three months into the job, over dinner at Syed Ahmad Sahabuddin's house, I met Dr Mahathir Mohamad, Zahir Ismail (now Speaker of Parliament), Azahari Taib (now a Tan Sri) and one or two others. Syed Ahmad is now the Governor of Malacca. The relationship has endured for 38 years.

Tun Razak, one of Malaysia's astute politicians, was grooming four young Umno leaders for the future but his best wager was Dr Mahathir, who yesterday celebrated his 20th year in office.

Dr Mahathir fully justified the long-term and shrewd assessments of Tun Razak's advisors.

The British political intelligence service had devoted much time cultivating three KL-based young Turks, giving Dr Mahathir, the oldest of the four (and living up north in the provincial town of Alor Star) scant attention.

"A silly mistake", a senior British diplomat, in typical British understatement, said to me when Dr Mahathir launched the "Buy British Last" policy in 1981.

I consoled him, "Well, two nearly made it." He appeared mollified a bit. Despite that he earned a knighthood many years later.

In his early years and even after he joined the Front Bench (before becoming PM) Dr Mahathir was an extremely committed politician.

But after two score years, though he has not, I think, wavered in his mission to push the Bumiputeras to greater heights, he has become a bit circumspect and is more willing to learn and even allow himself to be persuaded to try an alternative route to achieve his cherished aims.

Twenty years is eternity in politics. His political longevity is unlikely to be surpassed for a long time in a democracy. He and Umno are facing a major intellectual and political threat that could well transform Malaysia into a theocratic, scrupulously purist Islamic nation.

A strict Islamic theocratic state will spell doom for personal freedom, liberal traditions and even the free market and anything and everything which smacks of the free market and westernisation.

This is pre-eminently the time, in the face of Pas' ultra-Islamic assault, for Dr Mahathir and us Malaysians to speak the truth, frankly and boldly. Nor need we shrink from honestly facing the conditions in our nation today.

I believe, under Dr Mahathir's continued and courageous leadership, Malaysia will endure as it has endured, will recover and will prosper.

But first of all, every sane Malaysian, the non-Malay silent majority

especially, must rally behind the present middle-of-the-road Government to fight and convert what appears to be political inaction into bold advance.

Now is the time for all good men and women to come to the aid of Dr Mahathir to ensure that we are a "no-lose" position.

The people must realise that the sooner they do this the better. Pas is no longer a paper tiger. The only name of the game is Islam, a radical pan-Islamism which will extinguish any secular-nationalist coalition and traditions. Surprisingly, even the minute "Stalinist" Parti Rakyat appears to be accepting the fait accompli.

Pas is no longer a blustering provincial party with no real strength; it is a terrifying force now and in the future. Well, it's obviously more than a drizzle and it can and will get heavier; it is not a passing shower. Get your umbrellas ready or call the bomoh!

I have used the metaphor tiger because the Pas tiger has long stalked the Malaysian political landscape, virtually ignored even by Umno and because of this the party is now paying a high price for its complacency.

In the arrogance of power, it never occurred to the Umno leadership that Pas was a threat, and so they let it be. Now there is dismay at the level of acceptance that Pas enjoys among a particular group of Malays.

Make no mistake, the Pas tiger is lean and hungry.

The ruling Umno needs a paradigm shift which will lead, I hope, to inventive and radical changes throughout, re-inventing and re-organising it, not necessarily enlarging it. Without a comprehensive overhaul it may be difficult to enthuse the young leaders and voters and capture their imagination and commitment and loyalty.

Old assumptions have been replaced by new paradigms, as in the shift from thinking that the majority of Malays will automatically support Umno, Malay Special Position and privileges, and moderate Islam, to a new paradigm that there are Malays now perhaps even willing to make a volte-face, simply to hurt Umno because a house or a race divided against itself shall not stand: Kelantan and Terengganu.

But then in the two Malay-dominated states Umno, or rather the leadership, is generally derided and in two or three cases despised.

I am an optimist, the Malay support has not become irrecoverable. It can and will be reclaimed if the Malays and Malaysians believe Umno and the Government have cleansed themselves of the bad apples, rotten eggs, the corrupt who abuse their office, and deadwood.

Whether one likes it or not, we need a leader of conviction, a strong personality, not intimidated by criticism from within or without, a well-tested and experienced man to destroy the political parasites who are maiming and slowly killing the party and government.

"Re-inventing Umno" and the "New paradigm government" ideas should appeal to the majority of Malaysians. If this does not work, well, a re-invented Pas, buttressed by DAP and Keadilan, is waiting in the wings.

I am confident a serious and credible re-invented Umno and government will enlist the unconditional support of all. Spell out the new plan with new players at an appropriate time.

The irony is that the only lead player who can do all this is Dr Mahathir, 76, who may go down in history as someone who made a difference.

Dr Mahathir has a fantastic appetite for hard work, the ability to confront challenges and an iron constitution despite his heart surgery.

He can rise to the occasion at the crucial point, especially if it threatens his legacy, because he doesn't think he must be popular, attractive, sociable and deferential if he can get the job done to save the nation from Pas, which can also abort his Vision 2020 in 2003 or 2004.

I can't think of anyone else with courage, education, experience and mindset who would dare to stick his neck out for us.

Life isn't going to be good for anyone under Pas and Malaysian women, Muslims in particular, are going to get a very raw deal.

The next time around we will know whether there exists a particular indefinable political electricity between Umno and the Malays and non-Malays.

Journalists, writers and historians tend to be kinder to winners than to losers.

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