

Benefits of having a transition plan

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WHEN Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad made his dramatic announcement about his resignation from his Umno and Barisan Nasional posts and Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi retracted the decision on his behalf an hour later, in the wake of an emotional outpouring of support for the former, the cynics dismissed the entire episode as yet another *sandiwara*.

It was all calculated, they proclaimed, to give the impression that Dr Mahathir was loved by the people.

Twenty-four hours later, as more and more details about that June 22 episode and subsequent events began to surface, the cynics realised that there was something more to Dr Mahathir's announcement.

The talk in town was that he was serious about quitting. The cynics changed their story immediately. If he is quitting, it is because he has been forced to relinquish all his positions in the party and the Government.

There were other kinds of preposterous theories which proved to be utterly nonsensical the moment the Umno leadership endorsed Dr Mahathir's clearly articulated plan for a transition of power from him to Abdullah over a period of 16 months or so, culminating in his departure from office after the Organisation of Islamic Conference meeting in Kuala Lumpur in October next year.

And, in his opening address to the Umno general assembly on June 20, it was apparent that something was afoot judging from the manner in which he asked for forgiveness from the delegates and the Malay community for his alleged failure to transform the Malay mindset so that it would be more attuned to the demands of a competitive global economy.

It was as if he had come to the end of his tether. Indeed, a degree of disillusionment with certain attitudes within the community - its alleged lack of discipline and perseverance - may well have served to hasten Dr Mahathir's decision to quit.

Though he had made no direct reference to his imminent resignation, there was no doubt at all that the writing was on the wall. In that sense, Dr Mahathir is, for a student of politics, a much easier person to read than many other politicians in the country. One just has to compare him to certain wily politicians whose mastery of the art of duplicity and hypocrisy is so great that they have been able to deceive the people for decades.

In this regard, it is important to remind ourselves that the Prime Minister actually wanted to step down at the end of 1998, after the Commonwealth Games. He had appointed his then deputy, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, as acting Umno president and acting prime minister for two months - in June and July of that year - while he

contrast to a sudden, abrupt change, would help to assure the market that there would be continuity in economic policies. Such assurance is imperative at this stage since domestic and foreign investors see Dr Mahathir as a prime minister who has managed the economy well and accelerated social progress.

The 16-month-long transition is also designed to reduce factionalism and the jostling for power within Umno. When a powerful and dominant leader who has exercised effective authority for 21 years leaves the stage, it is quite conceivable that a political vacuum could develop. It could give rise to factional feuds fuelled by contending chieftains seeking to control the party.

This is why Dr Mahathir has to phase himself out gradually to enable Abdullah to gain more and more power and authority over a period of time. The phased transition will also provide both Dr Mahathir and Abdullah with the opportunity to gauge the response of the three vice-presidents, and perhaps other contenders for high office, towards the Prime Minister-in-waiting. Both of them would want the new number two to demonstrate vividly that he or she is capable of working in tandem with Abdullah.

A transition under the oversight of a strong incumbent like Dr Mahathir has yet another advantage. It would reinforce Abdullah's position as he prepares for both the party and general election.

No one who is being forced out of office would be able to exercise so much control over his exit timetable. Dr Mahathir, it is obvious, had worked out his own transition schedule guided by his interests and the interests of the party and nation. Once again, he has demonstrated that he is in total command of the situation.

Not to be outdone, the cynics have now decided to pour scorn upon the transition plan. It is too long a transition, they say, and anything can happen in 16 months. It is a recipe, they charge, for the intensification of infighting and chaos in the party. Some are convinced that it is a cunning ruse to ensure that Dr Mahathir remains in power *ad infinitum*.

While it is true that anything can happen between now and October 2003, it is important that all of us give the transition plan a chance to succeed. Those of us who are sceptical about it would do well to reflect more deeply upon Dr Mahathir's resignation and the plan itself. They may want to consider the following arguments in particular.

Before the Prime Minister's June 22 Umno assembly speech there were already indications that he was intending to quit at some point. Immediately after the last general election, he had hinted that his current term of office would be his last.

In a couple of interviews with the local and foreign media in the last three years he had suggested that once the economy was on a sound footing and Umno had recovered lost ground he would call it a day. His off-the-cuff comments in his parliamentary constituency of Kubang Pasu on a couple of occasions also showed that he was thinking of retiring from politics to devote more time to religion, writing and family.

went on leave.

In the months before the two appointments, he had made it explicitly clear to both his party and Cabinet colleagues that **Anwar**, his protege, the "apple of his eye" in politics, was his anointed heir. But **Anwar's** subsequent betrayal of the trust of his patron and protector compelled the Prime Minister and Umno president to sack him from both the Cabinet and the party.

It is alleged that when the nation was in the midst of a severe financial crisis in 1997-98, **Anwar**, backed by local and foreign elements, sought to undermine Dr Mahathir's leadership while the Prime Minister was battling great odds to save the nation's economy and protect its sovereignty.

There may be another reason why Dr Mahathir has decided to resign. When long serving leaders who have exercised tremendous power die in office or are forced out of the job, they are often discredited, denigrated and disgraced. Their achievements are minimised while their wrongdoings are magnified. This was the fate of Suharto, who ruled Indonesia with an iron fist for 32 years, and of President **Marcos** of the Philippines, who was a dictator for 14 out of the 18 years he was in power.

Dr Mahathir knows that one's image is better protected and one's legacy better preserved through an orderly transfer of power. He only has to look at Lee Kuan Yew, the authoritarian Prime Minister of Singapore for 31 years before he retired in 1990, to appreciate why a planned transition of power is preferable.

If understanding the Prime Minister's resignation is critical, it is equally crucial to develop a clear perspective on the transition plan. A reasonably extended transition, in

More than what it would do for the party, the transition plan is vital for ensuring the political stability of the country. Malaysia is one of the few countries in the South that have witnessed peaceful, orderly transfer of power from one prime minister to another since Independence in 1957. Though the circumstances of each of these transitions have been different, it is irrefutably true that there has been no disruption in the transmission of power and authority from one leader to another.

It has enabled the nation to plan for the economic and social development of the people in an atmosphere of peace and tranquillity. In this connection, it is a pity that the Western media which often lament the chaos and turmoil of countries in the South, have been reluctant to acknowledge Malaysia's remarkable achievement in managing, in a peaceful and orderly manner, each and every transition of power in the last 45 years.

What this also shows is that certain political processes are beginning to take root. It is when political processes and political and administrative institutions which contribute towards good governance, are anchored in the political culture of a people, that the society can be described as a "mature polity."

There are, of course, many important institutions of formal and informal governance in Malaysia which have yet to mature. This is why how we handle the present transition of power from Dr Mahathir to Abdullah will be decisive. It will show whether processes and institutions of governance have acquired greater significance than the individuals who preside over them or not. For in the ultimate analysis, it is these processes and institutions -and not the individual -which will determine our destiny as a nation.