

Looking beyond Dr M

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| COMMENT BY AZAM ARIS |

Nik called the day pandemonium broke out at the Putra World Trade Centre after Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad announced to the delegates of the Umno general assembly his wish to resign as Umno president and prime minister. He has this to say: "Dr Mahathir is a great leader but what shocked me is the way Umno members and the Malays [and if this writer may add, the nation] reacted. It is as if they cannot see anything beyond Dr Mahathir. This is sad."

There were cries of "we want you to stay" everywhere. A family even placed a full-page advertisement in *The New Straits Times* echoing the plea. But if there is one word in the ad that I can agree with, it is "selfish". Yes, the nation is full of selfish people.

Dr Mahathir has served the nation for 21 years as prime minister and has been active in politics for more than 55 years. During his premiership, he has changed the country's economic landscape and Malaysia has progressed into a modern and industrialising nation. He has also successfully steered the country out of two recessions.

Umno, the party he has led, has remained strong and united despite two crippling setbacks — the 1987 presidential contest with Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah that split the party, and the dismissal of former deputy prime minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim in 1998 which angered the Malays. Today, Umno and Barisan Nasional still enjoy more than two-thirds majority in Parliament.

Socio-economically, the income level of average Malaysians has risen and many of the targets under the New Economic Policy — poverty eradication, restructuring of society and higher participation of bumiputeras in the corporate sector — have been achieved. These objectives remain key ingredients of present economic plans.

Still, many of us demand more from the 76-year-old leader. Dr Mahathir deserves a

break. Do we still want to deny him the time and space he needs to be closer to his family, God and religion? We must not, and as a nation, we must move on. The new leaders must take charge, be responsible and accountable to the nation.

Had the chairman of the general assembly managed to take charge and calm the supreme council members and delegates on that eventful Saturday of June 22, giving Dr Mahathir time to regain his composure, perhaps he would have finished his speech. The nation would have listened and understood why he wanted to relinquish all his posts and when. It would have also erased a lot of speculation. The Umno General Assembly, which gives him the mandate to lead the party, is the right exit and platform to do so.

We still don't know the reasons why he wants to quit, but October 2003 has been set as the date when Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi will become our fifth prime minister. The 16-month transition will see Dr Mahathir remaining the prime minister and finance minister, with Pak Lah playing a more prominent leadership role. During this period, Pak Lah will also become acting prime minister and finance

minister whenever Dr Mahathir goes on leave.

The question of whether Pak Lah is ready now should not arise as he is in his mid-60s, has been the deputy prime minister and deputy Umno president since 1999 and assumed important Cabinet posts as education, defence and foreign minister since 1984.

He has also experienced the ups and downs of politics — often the necessary "phase" that leaders need to undergo to become better politicians. Like Dr Mahathir, who was sacked from the party after the May 1969 racial riot, Pak Lah was in the political wilderness when he was kept out of the Cabinet for supporting the Tengku Razaleigh/Tan Sri Musa Hitam team that tried to wrest power from Dr Mahathir during party elections in 1987. He saw how the party split and knows that a smooth transition is the key factor in ensuring party unity.

Although there is no clear indication of who will be Umno's number two leader, the current three vice-presidents of Datuk Seri Najib Razak, Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib and Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin are experienced leaders. All three have administered state governments in the capacity of menteri besar of Pahang, Selangor and Johor, respectively. Najib and Muhyiddin are cur-

rently federal Cabinet ministers.

The position of No 2 in the party could be decided by party election, which is due next year. If this is done, Umno's democratic process is well and alive and the winner will have the endorsement he needs from the party. However, by virtue of becoming president and following Umno's tradition, Pak Lah could also handpick his deputy.

While Dr Mahathir's successor has been named, some question the length of the transitional period. Sixteen months is a long time in politics. Will power play dominate the transition period? Will jostling and lobbying for political positions and business projects intensify as the deadline for the transfer of power approaches?

This will not necessarily happen if the vice-presidents and leaders of the Barisan Nasional component parties adhere to the pledges they have made in the past week, notably in supporting Pak Lah and ensuring smooth transition and party unity.

For the new guards, the task is not just to ensure there is a smooth transition but also to look at what lies ahead — the challenges facing the nation. The biggest of these is political and business patronage. Then, there is the perception of many that fundamental liberties guaranteed under the Federal Constitution are being eroded.

Dr Mahathir, in his landmark book *The Malay Dilemma*, which he wrote in 1970, raised the issue of patronage as one of the reasons of what had gone wrong in Malaysia, leading to the eventual racial riots in 1969.

He writes: "The advent of patronage as a factor in intra-party politics was significant for it meant that the leaders were no longer answerable to the ordinary members and the faceless supporters but were only answerable to themselves.

"A feeling of power normally grips those who wield patronage, a feeling that they can mould and shape people and opinion any way they please. The leaders of Umno, the senior partners of the Alliance Government [MCA and MIC] succumbed to this disease and believing that they no longer needed to heed the opinions of their supporters [and again, if this writer may add in today's context — the rakyat], they disregarded them at every turn."

In the same chapter, entitled "What went wrong?", he emphasises the need for superior skills to be at the helm of the government. He writes: "It is obvious that only the most capable and experienced should be made ministers and be in the Cabinet. But independent Malaya chose to treat membership of the Cabinet as a reward for loyalty to party chiefs... Once appointed, no amount of dereliction of duty could affect the position of a minister... The result was that mediocre men were left to run the country."

On the then-Alliance government, he comments: "... But the government was apparently oblivious to what went on around it. Secure in its absolute majority in Parliament, it was contemptuous of criticism. Policies were made which completely ignored public opinion."

Thirty-two years have passed since Dr Mahathir made these comments but they are valid till today within Umno and Malaysian politics. Did Dr Mahathir fail to change the system that dictates Malaysian politics? It's a debatable issue, no doubt. But then, how will the new guards face these same challenges?

The nation's four premiers — Dr Mahathir, Tun Hussein Onn, Tun Abdul Razak and Tunku Abdul Rahman — are great leaders in their own right. They had their flaws but each managed to take the country to a greater height than his predecessor did.

For Malaysia, nothing less than this is expected from the new guards. **E**

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