

Mahathir and His Retirement Plans

Malaysians worry too much about politics without their long-time premier

APART FROM THE SUDDENNESS of his announcement, Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad's on-off-delayed retirement plans should be neither a surprise nor a reason to fret. The same goes for his eventual replacement by his deputy, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. (See article on page 12.)

Speculation already was rife in the mid-1990s that Dr. Mahathir was preparing to retire. Then came the Asian financial crisis. After he had spent more than a decade nurturing a Third World natural-resources producer into a manufacturing economy (with plans to go beyond that), it became unlikely Dr. Mahathir would leave just yet. Five years on, though, things have changed. The economy has perked up as export demand revives; criticism about local companies is being addressed. Moreover, the prime minister's party, the United Malays National Organization, has seen its fortunes improve as dissatisfaction with the party and Dr. Mahathir over Anwar Ibrahim's sacking wanes and the party begins to pick up new, younger members. Now would appear to be a good time for Dr. Mahathir to declare his innings closed.

Yet for some this has raised the issue of economic stability. Can Mr. Abdullah complete the corporate clean-up and fix any lingering worries about the economy? But policy continuity was as much the issue five years ago when Mr. Anwar was seen as the heir apparent, for instance. Later, Mr. Anwar's dismissal prompted the disappointment that policy *wouldn't* change after all. Analysts can be a fickle lot.

That said, policy is fleshed out and executed by the bureaucracy. So unless Mr. Abdullah has other thoughts about the economy, and the indications are that he doesn't differ with Dr. Mahathir on this, policy isn't about to change. (But no doubt, it won't be long before analysts again begin to wonder whether any part of that policy actually should

change, such being the nature of punditry.)

Another issue for Umno is the politics of Islam as represented by Pas, the Islamic party. Pas has been trying to paint Umno into a corner. Terengganu, one of two states it controls, is now planning a bill that will put Muslim alleged criminals under Islamic-court jurisdiction.

However, criminal law is a federal matter and states have no right to legislate on acts already covered by federal law. To be sure, Terengganu's leadership must know this and probably is waiting for the Umno-led federal government to nix it—as it must by the constitution—and then decry Umno as “insufficiently” Islamic. Already, Dr. Mahathir has said, “We will study the powers vested in the federal government and if it has the power, the government will obstruct the implementation of the proposed bill which is unfair [and] against the teachings of Islam.” Yet the balance between conservative and progressive Islam long has been an issue in Malaysia, certainly before Dr. Mahathir became prime minister; it'll continue to be one regardless of when he retires.

That notwithstanding, given Mr. Abdullah's credentials he may have an easier job of wooing Muslim voters to the Islamic centre. The deputy premier read Islamic studies in university before entering the civil service, and more importantly comes from a family of noted Islamic scholars.

Malaysians feistily defend themselves as a democracy. In democracies what counts is institutional stability, not any one person's tenure as leader. Dr. Mahathir's impending retirement should let Malaysia show that the formal structure of its politics is robust. Though his administration has been good to Malaysians, who have seen their incomes rise since two decades ago, the institutions are in place for them to get on without him. ☛