

# Mahathir Passes the Baton

By Abdullah Ahmad

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The strength of Malaysia's democracy has been change, yet one that involves continuity and a smooth succession and transfer of power. Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad did not fall from power as did Ferdinand Marcos and Suharto. After 21 years in office, he suddenly announced his decision to resign. Nothing forced him, and circumstances in fact have been so favourable to his continued leadership that they added to a nationwide sense of disbelief and shock at his decision. He only crafted a phased-out retirement that becomes effective in late 2003 after he saw video clips of the reaction of the people and of delegates to the United Malays National Organization (Umno) annual meeting where he made his announcement.

Mahathir's departure 16 months hence will not, or rather, should not, provoke any problem. Nothing will shake Umno's new strength of purpose or the country's revived confidence. In the 45 years since independence, Malaysia's multiracial population has developed a great sense of belonging, perhaps even becoming part of a mature nationalism. Malaysians will make their fifth prime minister's job no more difficult than the balancing of competing interests that has made Malaysia a beacon of stability and prosperity in the developing and Islamic world.

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Mahathir faced no predicament in his choice of successor. He has paved the way for Abdullah Ahmad Badawi to take full charge of Malaysia Inc. Abdullah will have a reservoir of good men and women to choose from. We need good people to have virtuous government. For however good is any system of government, the corrupt can only bring harm. So many nations have come to grief, impoverished by the desperation of political leaders to stay on top. The good news for Abdullah is that whoever runs Malaysia finds support from the civil service, the main anchor of the country's well-being. It has been Malaysia's fortune that the civil service has been relatively efficient, impartial and tolerably clean. But there is no room for complacency; things can turn bad. The key is to

continue the process of ensuring that “tolerably clean” becomes unquestionably so.

Abdullah and I are contemporaries. We worked together in the crucial period when Tun Abdul Razak moved up from the deputy prime minister's office to become prime minister in the wake of the 1969 race riots. Abdullah is able and can be relied upon to hold his own when the crunch arises.

Why is this important? Because though riots, coups or revolutions simply do not happen in Malaysia, these are different times after the events of September 11. As the United States has found, foreign influences can come to play in the stability of a nation's peace. But should there be any attempt at subversion after October 2003, it will be crushed. Malaysia has never been forgiving of terrorism or political violence. This hasn't changed.

As for political stability, Umno is recovering after some rough years. The opposition Islamic party Pas will prove no match for Umno except in the most insular reaches of the Malay heartland. Now that the Pas leadership has also changed to Abdul Hadi Awang, hardline cleric and *hudud* law personified, the choice for the majority of Malays will be even easier. And for non-Malays, who form about 40% of the electorate, it's a no-brainer.

While Mahathir's departure will be a relief to some, Malaysians generally are fond of him. They should thus help push the agenda for which he has set the tone: first, to raise global competitiveness by an easing of affirmative-action policies for *bumiputras*, the promotion of meritocracy and the use of English in education, and secondly the reinforcement of national integration through reform of the school system as well as the economy.

Abdullah will be 64 when he becomes prime minister, the oldest on record in Malaysia. He will therefore be better prepared than any one of his predecessors to manage Umno and the national consensus. Abdullah also will be the first prime minister with a religious education. That should place him in a better position to merge Umno's liberal traditions with its new-age Islamic credentials.

The cooperation of all will be required to continue the long, hard work of building a united Malaysia. Beyond that, the creation of a new generation proficient in Malay, English and perhaps also in Arabic and Mandarin to take over the reins of government might still be a long way off, but the nation's future cohesion and prosperity will depend on it. ■