

Dealing **with** the **long** goodbye

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A LONG goodbye is not easy, as Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad must have discovered by now.

It has been four months since the Prime Minister announced his intention to retire and in 12 months from now, he will finally call it a day in politics.

Some say this extraordinary man is looking forward to the day after 21 years in the top post.

As he has hinted in various public statements over the past months, there are books to be written, time to be spent with a growing number of grandchildren, travelling, riding horses and even sailing.

At the same time, there are also some who have yet to come to terms with a Malaysia without Dr Mahathir, or more specifically, an Umno minus Dr Mahathir.

There have been a variety of statements from some top names in Umno inviting, and in some instances, begging, the Premier not to retire completely from politics.

Perlis Mentri Besar Datuk Seri Shahidan Kassim has offered Dr Mahathir a choice of any seat in Perlis to contest in the next general election.

Two other MBs, Datuk Seri Adnan Yaakob and Datuk Wira Ali Rustam, have urged their party president to at least remain an MP.

And a week ago, former Kelantan strongman Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah told a gathering in Gua Musang that he would like to see Dr Mahathir continue as an MP after the next general election so that he would continue to enjoy a mandate to speak on issues.

in Umno, have postponed the state's turn to host the Barisan Nasional Convention till after Ramadan.

The convention was scheduled for Oct 29 and invitation cards had even been sent out.

"We really wanted Pak Lah to officiate at the convention and he is not available till after Raya," explained Alwi.

But all this is quite natural. A transition is taking place, the tides are changing and the sands shifting.

Of late, former Deputy Prime Minister Tan Sri Musa Hitam has even been approached by individuals who want him to team up with Tengku Razaleigh.

Musa's reaction to such approaches has been to laugh in their faces. He has told them he no longer has the stomach for such politics and, besides, he and Pak Lah have been getting along famously for quite a number of years now.

Few are aware that they see each other often and exchange news and opinions.

But the mainstream thinking in Umno seems to be that Dr Mahathir should be allowed to act as he thinks fit and not be placed under pressure of resolutions or press statements.

First, they believe that Dr Mahathir is genuinely adamant about wanting to retire as Prime Minister. The tears were real and his words and actions subsequently have not suggested that he intends to change his mind.

The recent interview with CNN, they said, was an important indication of that. It was the first time that he had said it so directly to the international media.

But the most concerted call for Dr Mahathir to rethink his retirement came this week when the **Pasir** Mas Umno division in Kelantan passed an unreserved resolution adulating the Prime Minister, rejecting his plans not to contest the next polls and urging him to defend his Kubang Pasu seat.

The man behind the **Pasir** Mas resolution was, of course, none other than the gung-ho Datuk Paduka Ibrahim Ali who heads the division.

"This is my expression of love for and confidence in Dr Mahathir," said Ibrahim in his over-the-top style.

A large part of such calls have been based on the grounds that Dr Mahathir's services are still needed both on a domestic and at international level.

But that is only one side of the story.

The please-don't-go-yet calls have been countered by pleas to respect Dr Mahathir's wish to retire.

The latter group have included Mahathir loyalist Datuk Zainuddin Maidin, Kelantan Umno chief Datuk Mustapha Mohamed as well as Datuk Idris Jusoh, Umno chief of Terengganu.

They said that Dr Mahathir should not be pressured to change his mind and that he should be allowed to act on his own free will.

The contrasting statements have been a hot topic of discussion among the Umno coffee house/warung crowd. They are curious, intrigued and even confused over what could possibly be going on behind the statements.

"Umno politics is not like glass where you can see right through . . . so people like to read in between the lines," said Kelantan politician Alwi Che **Ahmad**.

For a start, many have noted the curious fact that those urging Dr Mahathir to stay on had been previous foes of his. And now it seems to be his loyalists who are urging that the Prime Minister be allowed to go as he wishes.

"Things have gone upside down," said an Umno Youth politician from Kedah.

There has also been quite a bit of name-calling.

Those who want Dr Mahathir's retirement plan to be respected have been **labelled** opportunists who are trying to curry favour with

Prime Minister-to-be Datuk Seri Abdullah **Ahmad** Badawi.

And, quite ironically, those wanting a continued political role for Dr Mahathir have also been tagged as opportunists whose wagons are still hitched to the Prime Minister.

Given the Malay preoccupation for conspiracy theories, there has been endless talk of "hidden motives" and of "the unseen hand" behind the statements.

They read it as reluctance on the part of some individuals in accepting Pak Lah as the next Prime Minister even as many others are beginning to gravitate and rally around him.

Ibrahim, for instance, has been branded as first, looking out for his own interest and, second, acting at

the behest of his one-time mentor, Tengku Razaleigh, something which he has denied.

"The resolution has nothing to do with Tengku Razaleigh. I am not against Pak Lah either," Ibrahim insisted.

Others say Ibrahim is simply being his usual impulsive self, rash and unafraid to buck the trend. He has quite openly gone against his state chief Mustapha in pressing ahead with his **Pasir** Mas resolution.

Kelantan politics is anything but boring and the group that revolves around Tengku Razaleigh is said to still harbour political hopes for the charismatic royal politician.

But Kelantan Umno, in a move that seems aimed at emphasising their stand on the political transition

ALL SET TO GO . . . the general feeling is that Dr Mahathir is adamant about wanting to retire. The tears were real and his subsequent words and actions do not suggest that he intends to change his mind.

The session he had with Pakistan leader Pervez Musharraf was another significant indication.

"You cannot turn back after all this," said one former deputy minister.

A number of Umno politicians have also drawn on some of Dr Mahathir's more well-known remarks.

For instance, when quizzed about his youthful looks, the Premier had often quipped that one should choose one's parents and that one should stop eating when the food tastes really good.

The latter, they say, suggests that Dr Mahathir understands the importance of timing.

Dr Mahathir himself has also, at a number of closed-door Umno meetings, said to Umno leaders, "*Sampai bila nak tongkat langit?*" meaning that they could not depend on him indefinitely.

Zainuddm said: "It is not about whether I support Dr Mahathir more than Pak Lah but I believe Dr Mahathir has really made up his mind to go. I would like to see him go when he is riding a peak. To go when you are popular . . . it's the best way to be remembered."

The attempts to keep Dr Mahathir back in some political capacity has to do also with the fact that there is as yet no defined post-Premier role for him.

There is no doubt that many in Umno want to see him in some active capacity, whether locally or internationally, and unless and until that comes about, the attempts to restrain him from going into complete retirement will go on.