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Back at the helm

TANNED, rested, refreshed and in manifestly better spirits than the last time the nation saw him, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has returned from his 10 days' messing about in boats around the charming ports of Italy's Adriatic coast to resume his duties as Member of Parliament for Kubang Pasu, president of Umno, chairman of the Barisan Nasional, Finance Minister and Prime Minister of Malaysia. It's said that "a change is as good as a rest", but now we see that the reverse also applies: A rest is as good as a change.

For Malaysia changed in the week-and-a-half Dr Mahathir was away. The bombshell he dropped on June 22 at the Umno general assembly sent its necessary repercussions throughout the nation's body politic, rapidly shaping new scenarios for the future: immediate, near and long-term. In the fortnight since then, Malaysia has adjusted to the reality of impending change in the peculiarly, and thankfully, Malaysian way of ensuring as much continuity as is reasonable. That's how this nation has always managed change, even in the most traumatic situations. It's how we've shepherded ourselves through each of the three changes of chief executive this country has undergone since Independence, and there is now no reason to doubt that this tradition of temperate transition will be maintained for the fourth, at the end of October next year.

Thanks to the urging of Umno's and the BN's supreme councils and the Cabinet, not to mention the concerted howl of anguish from a significant chunk of the Malaysian populace, Dr Mahathir is now serving out what amounts to a 16-month notice. This should provide ample time to tie up the remaining loose ends and unfinished business of the record-breaking Mahathir Administration and get everything ship-shape for his successor, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who will become the fifth Prime Minister in 46 years.

And, perhaps, beyond? Speaking to the Press on his return, Dr Mahathir alluded to the possibility of the deputy premiership for Datuk Seri Najib Razak, currently the ranking and popular Umno vice-president in terms of the party vote. Lest this be spun along too dizzy a tangent, however, it bears emphasising that the Prime Minister was simply reiterating the leading BN party's constitutional hierarchy. Between now and the unforeseeable future, perhaps a decade or more hence, the guiding line within Umno, and, by extension, the Barisan Nasional Government, should be a scrupulous attention to the order of succession according to that hierarchy.