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Change and continuity

Abdullah Ahmad

THE comparison between Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi is a natural one, but is not entirely fair to either. Both men are distinguished politicians. One is a strong personality who dominates everything, the other is mild but can be firm. Ask Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik and Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik and they will confirm that on matters of principle, Abdullah is no pushover.

Nobody had any inkling of the PM's decision to resign. On Thursday, I had tea with him at the VIP lounge (behind the stage of the Dewan Merdeka, PWTC) and he was in a jovial mood. He congratulated me for something - a rarity. With the PM, if he didn't say anything, one knew he was happy with one. If he congratulated or thanked you, it was an exception, a job really well done.

The "timetable" for a smooth succession has been fair. If anyone perceives Dr Mahathir as a "lame duck", as is the norm in a phased withdrawal, it's wise not to think that - in any event, he is not an ordinary man.

On Saturday, I didn't go to the Umno general assembly at PWTC for two reasons: to watch the Korean-Spanish football duel - I won a bottle of "syrup" from my sports editor, Lazarus Rokk - and to write my weekly columns for the New Sunday Times and Berita Minggu. I had thought he was resigning as Minister of Finance until I heard "a short, sharp shock of brutal reality" as my colleague Rehman Rashid described what Dr Mahathir had done.

I received calls from Australia, Thailand, Italy, Hong Kong, London and from locals. I believe I explained to them what had happened as I saw it. They must have been either impressed or found me shallow because none called back. I'd like to think I was convincing.

On Monday, I was invited to a breakfast meeting with Abdullah at his official residence in Putrajaya. My conversation with him was a wide-ranging one, which started with him alone, then we were joined by his closest advisor. Abdullah, to his credit, doesn't overestimate nor underestimate anyone.

I attended yesterday's media conference. Abdullah got a good reception. None of the Umno senior politicians had demurred. With the succession settled, it was right that if Abdullah was going to take over, he should have a decent period to act as PM. And this too was agreed.

All being well, after 22 years and three months Malaysia will have its fifth Prime Minister. Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir has agreed to leave office in October next year to make way for Abdullah. It was only after strenuous appeals that he relented, agreeing to stay on a while longer. He had sincerely wanted to go right away.

The Umno Supreme Council has unanimously supported the timetable for a smooth transition, as has the Barisan Nasional Supreme Council. The Cabinet will endorse it today. When he returns, Dr Mahathir will fulfill all his engagements before taking a two-month breather. Abdullah will then be acting PM in the real sense of the word.

Abdullah is my contemporary. He was one of the able young civil servants around Tun Razak when I was the latter's political secretary. Abdullah and I were together in the crucial period when Tun Razak moved up from Deputy Prime Minister to Prime Minister.

Dr Mahathir has made the right choice to relinquish the country's

leadership to Abdullah who has a good perspective of the social and political history of Malaysia, having worked with Tun Razak during the days of the National Operations Council and thereafter.

A capable officer, he left the civil service for politics at the behest of a senior politician and has served, in various capacities, Tun Hussein Onn and Dr Mahathir, culminating in his appointment as deputy president in 1999, after Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim's ouster.

I must now admit that I was wrong. To err is, after all, human, and I was all too human for having confused my earnest desire for the good of Umno and my country with the folly of predicting the future, particularly in politics. I had thought, and said so repeatedly, that the Prime Minister would die in office.

But I make no apologies. As with all great statesmen, Dr Mahathir's work is never done. He has grown so much larger than life and created a legacy so monumental that no one could have presumed his mantle.

Malaysia needs a firm hand at the wheel, and it was more than a comfort to have Dr Mahathir in the driver's seat. No other Prime Minister has led us through as many crises as he, and left us the better for it.

Abdullah can be counted on to hold his own, especially since his selection has been endorsed by the five party vice-presidents, Datuk Seri Najib Razak, Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz and Datuk Hishammuddin Hussein.

Dr Mahathir has spared us, for perhaps too long, of the worry of finding a successor. He has said many times that he will one day have to step down. But I never took him very seriously.

Like many, many Malaysians, I worried about what would come after him, and what would come after his successor.

I worried about party politicking, about the ruthlessness of power-hungry second-liners in filling a vacuum, about the sudden absence of a beacon of unity that had held the country together for 21 years. But the day had to come. And Dr Mahathir deserves my utmost respect for denying us the luxury of postponing the inevitable.

Now, the nettle of a post-Mahathir era must be grasped. Umno has always been able to effect stable leadership transitions, in spite of the ups and downs.

I have lived through all of them, from Datuk Onn Jaafar's fall from grace to Tunku Abdul Rahman's resignation a year after the May 13 riots, to Tun Razak's untimely demise and the tumultuous era of his successor, Tun Hussein Onn. Only the Tunku, Hussein and Dr Mahathir have been able to orchestrate an orderly changing of the guard, and they chose well.

Dr Mahathir would have articulated a careful plan and bade a measured farewell at the Umno general assembly in the weekend had he been allowed to finish his speech.

A page was never read; he was cut short by the emotional outburst from the floor and mobbed by Supreme Council members. But we must put the misconceptions, speculations and loose talk aroused by the suddenness of his decision behind us.

Dr Mahathir has laid out a phased withdrawal from his positions in the party and Government to ease in a new slate of leaders. I congratulate Abdullah for his eventual accession as Umno president, Barisan Nasional chairman and Prime Minister, and wish him well.

He will have his hardest job when the time comes to pick his deputy. Perhaps it will be all right if hierarchy is scrupulously adhered to. There should be no rush. He should cross the bridge in October next year. Anyway, many things will have to be considered then.

The complete changeover will take about 16 months. A gradual handover of power will be critical, for the future, as bright as it appears today, is

far from assured.

Umno faces the big test of the by-elections in the Pendang parliamentary seat and Anak Bukit State seat, vacated by the death of the Pas president and Opposition leader Datuk Fadzil Noor, next month or so and the even bigger one of the general election in less than two years.

In both, Dr Mahathir's presence will be sorely needed. It is still too soon for him to take a back seat, too soon to forget the 1999 election results. Don't forget that the renewed confidence that has accrued over the last year had been predicated on Dr Mahathir's continued helmsmanship (and the accuracy, until last Saturday, of my forecast).

A week is a long time in politics, a year an eternity. Anything can happen to spoil the best laid plans. It is still too early for the Opposition, particularly Pas, to rejoice; too early for any pretender among Umno's big guns to let their ambitions get the better of them.

When asked why he wanted (badly) to become President, John F. Kennedy (JFK) replied, "Because that's where the power is!"

And here, it's the PM.

Abdullah, like Dr Mahathir, is not easily carried away by power. In the case of both - indeed anyone with awesome power - the measure of the man, as Pittacus said, "is what he does with power."

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