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Criticisms are already under way, but Pak Lah should take them in his stride

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THERE is a painting of Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad hanging on the wall at the 39th floor of Menara Datuk Onn in Putra World Trade Centre where the Umno supreme council holds its meetings.

The painting, which is just behind the chair of the president, shows Dr Mahathir in an aggressive stance delivering a speech.

On Tuesday, when Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi announced Dr Mahathir's preparedness to serve as Prime Minister and in other positions until October next year, the painting appears to fit into the whole picture.

In short, Dr Mahathir will still be with Abdullah, or Pak Lah as he is affectionately called, during the transition period before Abdullah takes over all the responsibilities.

It was also noticed that the president's chair that Abdullah used on Tuesday was larger than that used by the supreme council members.

And Abdullah showed no signs of discomfort when sitting in the chair.

This actually reflected the situation. Abdullah is going to succeed Dr Mahathir come October 2003. Until then, Dr Mahathir is going to support his successor in the transition.

True, there can be hiccups in such political plans. But what had transpired since Saturday, when Dr Mahathir announced his resignation and retracted it an hour later, until Tuesday when Abdullah made the announcement on the transition of power, should put most Malaysians at ease.

For one, Abdullah going out of his way to ask Dr Mahathir to withdraw his resignation is something which seems to have been overlooked by many in the Malay community of late.

Before Abdullah, Dr Mahathir had faced ambitious Umno leaders who could not wait for the Prime Minister to step down. They were prepared to undermine him and work with the enemy, local or foreign, to get him out of office.

Some may conclude that Abdullah realises that he is not capable of stepping into Dr Mahathir's shoes.

Even if the view that Abdullah is not capable is true, then Abdullah is better than those who are incapable but are pushing themselves to the fore, offering themselves as better leaders to take over from Dr Mahathir.

To be realistic, Dr Mahathir's act is difficult to emulate, not only by Abdullah but by any other leader in Umno.

These are not the only 'problems' that Abdullah faces.

Next year is the party's election year and it should be the platform for delegates to endorse Abdullah as the successor to Dr Mahathir. The next question is who would Abdullah's choice be as his deputy 16 months down the road.

It could be any one of the three vice-presidents, Datuk Seri Najib Razak, Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib and Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, in the order of popular votes secured in the party elections in 2000.

Even though it is Abdullah's prerogative to choose his deputy in the government, the party deputy presidency, as much as the presidency, has to be determined by the party delegates.

However, given Umno's tradition, with the exception of 1987 when the party was split due to the contest for top posts, subsequent change in

leadership had been smooth.

While these concern internal politics, there are also external forces which Abdullah will have to face. Apart from earning domestic confidence, he would have to deal with the external forces which can be equally important.

Even before the transition gets underway, the foreign media has already started to mow Abdullah down with negative views, some quite malicious.

MCA Wanita chief Datuk Dr Ng Yen Yen was quick to notice this, singling out yesterday's Asian Wall Street Journal article written by Leslie Lopez.

She said the article quoted un-named analysts as saying that Abdullah may replace Dr Mahathir's economic advisers who are highly respected by foreign investors.

She also took offence to the article which stated that Abdullah's new role may lead to the return of wide-spread favouritism in business and the use of awarding licences and government contracts to increase political clout in the patronage-driven Umno.

Another point which irked Dr Ng was the statement that Abdullah could also attempt to gain popularity by placing greater emphasis on affirmative-action programmes for Malays, which Dr Mahathir has been trying to reduce.

In a statement issued yesterday, Dr Ng questioned the motive of the AWSJ article which is aimed at pitting a Malaysian leader against another apart from painting Malaysia negatively.

If it is any consolation to Dr Ng, such reports were written about Dr Mahathir, especially after the 1997 economic crisis and the 1998 political crisis.

They regularly and collectively believed that Dr Mahathir was the reason for anything that went wrong in the country.

Now that Dr Mahathir has decided to resign, Abdullah has become the target. In fact, some of the points raised by the article yesterday had been churned out against Dr Mahathir in the past.

Now, they are replacing Dr Mahathir's name with Abdullah.

Later when someone succeeds Abdullah, all the AWSJ has to do is to make the name change again, and retain the angle.

The publication is only being consistent - that is, no Malaysian leader is capable of managing the nation. No Malaysian leader can be as capable as a Western leader.

Abdullah should not fret. He should, as time progresses, prove these prophets of doom wrong.

The painting of Dr Mahathir should be enough to inspire him.

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