

03/07/2002

Dr Mahathir still holds the key to many unanswered questions

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WHEN Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad left the country on June 23, uncertainties shrouded his departure as there were numerous questions unanswered.

He left while the nation was still trying to dry its tears and getting over the shock over his announcement to resign. It was later revealed that a timetable of transition of power had been reached.

The Prime Minister's return today should be the culmination of the episode which began on the evening of June 22, during his winding-up speech at the 56th Umno general assembly.

The Umno and Barisan Nasional supreme councils had since then announced Dr Mahathir's preparedness to stay on until October 2003 apart from the endorsement of his deputy Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi as his successor.

Although some of the questions have been answered, more questions still beg replies. And the nation cannot be satisfied unless the answers come from the horse's mouth.

Actually there are several things which only Dr Mahathir can explain.

For starters, only he can answer as to why he decided to announce his resignation on June 22, why he chose the Umno assembly to do it, the reasons behind it and what finally convinced him to agree to withdraw.

Other questions which spilled over from his announcement to resign ranged from whether he thinks the nation is ready to move on without him, what will happen to policies known to have originated from him and does he expect his successor to pursue his vision and plans.

Another question which begs an answer from Dr Mahathir is on the formula of succession - does he expect Umno members to accept it or is there any need for the succession to be determined by the party and how will the party elections, scheduled for next year, reconcile with the succession formula.

And there is one burning question - what else did he want to say before his June 22 speech was prematurely ended.

For years, Dr Mahathir's return from trips abroad had been awaited with anticipation because he seemed to hold the answers to issues which cropped up during his absence.

It is no different today.

The only twist to the whole exercise is that this time around, the questions are about him.

Like it or not, the nation will look at Dr Mahathir on his return today in a different light.

Amid the accolades, the nation cannot but start thinking, among other things, what will be in store in the post-Dr Mahathir era.

Today, some 10,000 people are expected to wait at the TUDM base in Subang in the early hours of the morning to welcome him home.

Other programmes at state level are already lined up, all part of efforts to express support and appreciation for the leadership and guidance Dr Mahathir had given to Malaysia.

No doubt, Dr Mahathir is still going to be around for more than a year before he calls it quits. But the sense of loss is already felt.

His return today will not change that.

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