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All eyes on the succession

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THE countdown to the new year has started. However, for Malaysian politics, the countdown started on June 22 when Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad unexpectedly announced his resignation.

It became the biggest political event of the year.

The tears that flowed then have long dried up, but the countdown will continue until October next year when Dr Mahathir is scheduled to step down.

If the focus earlier was on why he chose to resign, it has now shifted to Malaysian politics in the post-Mahathir era.

There are several uncertainties despite Dr Mahathir's repeated statements that he will not change his mind. The uncertainties involve the "technical" aspects of political management.

For one, he has said he will not contest the next general election. That means the next general election will not be held until after Dr Mahathir's resignation in October.

An observer pointed out: "If the general election is held before October, it means that Dr Mahathir will have to step down earlier than scheduled.

"Otherwise, if he holds to his promise of not contesting in the next general election, he will not be an MP any more and he cannot then be the Prime Minister.

"Of course, he can be appointed a senator but surely he will not want to complicate his plans to resign."

Apart from the general election, the other aspect is the Umno election which is viewed as the final stage to complete the transition to the new team as well as legitimising the successors.

As for now, the Umno supreme council has decided that the party elections will be held after the general election, and that can actually resolve any complications which may arise after Dr Mahathir steps down.

With that, between October and the party elections, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi will be the Prime Minister and acting Umno president, while his deputy is expected to be Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak.

At least that is how the succession has been planned.

It could change come the Umno polls in which some rank outsiders may decide to challenge the new leadership. But it is unlikely to change the Umno equation by much.

While the party looks quite ready to deal with Dr Mahathir's resignation next year, a lot of things that happened this year could weaken the Barisan Nasional coalition before the next general election.

Umno's main coalition partner, the MCA, can be expected to continue with its protracted internal feuding between Team A and Team B.

It is obvious by now that the Prime Minister's peace plan only pacified the two rival factions temporarily. Hostilities have resumed and can only be expected to intensify next year.

To make matters worse, the recent issue involving two MCA Assemblymen in Penang has strained relations between the party and Gerakan, another of the BN's components.

No doubt, the MCA-Gerakan rivalry has persisted over three decades. But unless some amicable solution is found, the fall-out from the Penang episode may persist until the next general election.

The main beneficiary of the MCA's internal crisis and its rivalry with

Gerakan will definitely be the DAP.

After suffering severe setbacks in the last general election due to its tie-up with Pas and Parti Keadilan Nasional in the Opposition alliance, the DAP seems to be regaining some of the lost ground.

Its decision to break up its marriage with Pas seems to have helped, and the problems in the BN give it a much-needed boost, regardless of whether it is by default or otherwise.

As for Pas, it seems to be holding its own in Kelantan and Terengganu, apart from having a keen eye on Kedah.

Much of Umno's problems in Kelantan and Terengganu have to do with national issues.

Kelantan was lost in 1990 due to the conflict in Umno in the 1987 party elections. But two general elections have been held since then, and Pas still seems able to hold the State on its own.

Pas' sweeping victory in Terengganu in the 1999 general election was possible due to Umno's internal crisis following the sacking of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

Today, though the Anwar factor is said to be waning, Umno is still uncertain of regaining its footing in Terengganu.

While Umno is still recuperating from the 1999 backlash of Malay Muslim voters, some of its leaders seem to be trapped even today in their old political power plays.

The impending resignation of Dr Mahathir has opened up opportunities for these leaders to position themselves.

The recent and on-going Hari Raya open house functions hosted by top Umno leaders have been closely scrutinised by the political players.

Abdullah and Najib's open house functions became a sort of litmus test for some of the more ambitious Umno players, who wanted to be seen there, ensuring by their presence that they are remembered when the duo move up the ladder.

It was quite comical to hear from the aides and advisers of these two leaders how some of the "guests" who used to ignore invitations from these leaders were frantically trying to get themselves "invited".

"Dah start pasang angan-angan ('They have started day-dreaming')," remarked an Umno leader's aide cynically.

He was referring to the fact that the supporters of these leaders tend to believe that when the leader with whom they are aligned gets a grip on the powerful position they, too, will be attended to.

In short, they expect patronage to come their way, apart from being supported by the top leaders to positions and opportunities to be chosen as candidates.

That's what makes the countdown to October next year interesting, especially within Umno.

For these individuals believe in counting the chickens before they are hatched.