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Time out for a needed leader

IT was the half hour that shook the country. Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's resignation announcement struck delegates at the Umno general assembly, and the rest of the nation, like lightning out of a blue sky. To the loud relief of all, the party president gave in to the strenuous appeals of his deputy Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and the supreme council to stay on.

The Umno president, Barisan Nasional chairman and Prime Minister will take a well-earned rest before resuming his duties early next month. Malaysia needs him as much as it always has, and the nationwide lamentation aroused by his threat to quit Saturday evening proved how close he is to the hearts of his countrymen. Dr Mahathir's two decades at the helm have marked an era of unprecedented political stability, economic growth and prosperity. He has stamped himself indelibly on the national consciousness. It won't be easy to imagine life without him.

So why did he spring such a bone-jolting surprise on Umno delegates? Was it an expression of a purely personal disappointment at the stubborn inability of the Malays to get ahead? Was it a "wake up" call to his party, a substantial number of whose delegates left their seats at the great hall of the Putra World Trade Centre to watch Brazil play England in the World Cup on Friday?

Or was it a shock therapy foretaste of a post-Mahathir era about which too many in his party had thus far been heedless? Dr Mahathir has railed constantly and tirelessly against complacency and sloth, the twin evils of any political party that has been in power for as long as Umno has. At unguarded times, Umno looks more like a cabal of vested interests than a party of hardy principles and unassailable self-belief, which can stand up to its biggest foe, Pas.

Saturday night's events should snap the party ranks and the large body of beneficiaries of government largesse out of the habit of taking things for granted. The televised sight of Dr Mahathir, so long a pillar of strength and resolve, in tears broke our hearts. For the boldness of what he is trying to achieve for the Malays and the country, he deserves support and our unstinting commitment to act.

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