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Give the man his birthday wishes - peace and harmony

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SOME birthdays mean more than others. As do some gifts and presents, hugs and kisses. And if the birthday wishes and presents are sincere and genuine, they would certainly carry far greater meaning and significance.

For Mahathir Mohamad, a medical doctor with a Datuk Seri as the prefix to his name, Dec 20 saw him turn a young 77. Going by his daily schedule, Dr Mahathir is not likely going to tire and will continue to serve the nation as long as necessary as reflected in his sajak - Perjuangan belum selesai (The struggle is not over).

Yesterday, in Alor Star, the well-wishers came from near and far to join him in a Hari Raya gathering. Others had come to wish him many happy returns of the day. A birthday cake was presented and a simple doa selamat was recited.

At 77, and being the active person that he is and has always been, Dr Mahathir is still looking forward to new challenges.

He inspires. He challenges us physically and mentally, forever telling us to work hard and prove ourselves as warriors in all fields.

If today there are successful businessmen, some could have benefited from his policies and vision; if today there are adventurers who dare to scale high peaks and brave the stormy seas, I'm sure Dr M had a say somewhere. He is also very vocal against those who fail.

For as long as his people are entrenched in the pits of mediocrity, Dr Mahathir will continue to persuade, cajole, encourage and prod them to break away, seek new grounds and succeed in all endeavours.

If the people draw inspiration from Dr Mahathir, he too draws inspiration from the masses.

But who among the masses will rise to the challenge? Who among us will carry the torch he has lit, defend it and then make it shine even brighter? Equally important, who among us will fail him and, in the process, fail all?

Around the hall, questions were still being asked as to whether Dr Mahathir would really vacate his position and leave office next year. A senior government officer asked for my view, while a businessman asked if I know anything more other than what is reported in the newspapers.

As far as I know, Dr Mahathir will leave office the way he said he would, and nothing would change his mind.

For the sake of his credibility, and that of the country, Dr Mahathir will, out of his own free will, step down and hand over the reins to his successor, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

In his speech, Dr Mahathir, the Kubang Pasu Member of Parliament, made yet another plea to voters - please support whoever is chosen as candidate in the next general election for the Kubang Pasu seat.

The voters, and particularly the leaders in the constituency, should take heed of this plea, made for the umpteenth time.

The Kedah political leaders cannot but think very deeply about this piece of advice. There are undercurrents that need to be addressed; there are ground movements that can undermine the political leadership; there are ground troops that do not move at all, preferring to lie low and allow the political foes to dig in and take over.

For a long time, Dr Mahathir carried the flag under which every political group or clique rallied around the establishment. Firm when necessary, and gentle when required, Dr Mahathir, in his home State

commands respect more than fear. Many, I am told, are worried whether the State political leaders can carry the flag, and carry it well.

While it is appreciated and laudable to see the State fully committed to more economic development, my gut feelings suggest that the politics are being left behind.

Pursuing more economic development is exemplary and essential, but those who neglect the politics do so at their own peril. There are mending of fences that has to be done and given priority; while keeping the green tide at bay requires collective effort, unity of purpose and a sense of urgency.

Cast his eyes around the hall, I wonder what else Dr Mahathir saw that caught his attention. There were several past State leaders, besides the usual political operatives. In politics, one must have and strengthen one's base and grassroots. Dr Mahathir is certainly not worried about his grassroots, but factions in the State may pose some problems to the party he has led for the last two decades.

His lieutenants in the State cannot afford to slacken and should be aware of the undercurrents.

Kedah as Dr Mahathir's political bastion cannot fall to the Opposition, a scenario that the present State political leadership should not dismiss as impossible and unlikely.

Honour your commitment, I'd say to them. Redouble your unity-seeking efforts, I'd suggest. And at the risk of being accused mischievous and interfering, get your act together before you are made to leave the stage unceremoniously.

Even in managing economic endeavours, I'd suggest them to be professional and honour their promises and pledges.

To be fair, the State political leadership needs every able-bodied political operative to contribute at whatever level. Staying away and minding their own businesses will not help. It takes two to tango, of course.

As I left the Dewan Wawasan where the gathering was held, I thought that the best birthday present the people can give Dr Mahathir is peace and harmony, unity and progress. It'll be good if Kedah can start the ball rolling ...

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