

22/09/2002

Speculation on Dr Mahathir's intention should stop

Ahmad A. Talib

A FEW days ago, on Sept 13 to be precise, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad announced that he would not be seeking re-election in the next general election. Dr Mahathir has been the Member of Parliament for Kubang Pasu since 1974. Of course, he has since progressed from being an ordinary wakil rakyat to the nation's fourth Prime Minister.

He made the announcement in a speech at the meet-the-people session at Sultan Abdul Hamid College in Alor Star. It has triggered much analysis within Umno, BN, the country, and outside these circles. Every student of political science and observers of Malaysian politics are busy analysing the announcement and developing their respective theories.

Some of us scribes who have been covering Dr Mahathir even before he became Prime Minister in 1981 recall that he is not prone to making statements without weighing every word and phrase. Even the tone with which he makes them has certain significance. Dr Mahathir, in his own words, says what he means and means what he says.

Hence, when he made that announcement a few days ago, I for one believe that he means exactly that - he will not offer himself as a candidate in the next election. And as he had publicly stated, he will make his exit in October next year leaving Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi to head the party and Government.

Kedah Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Syed Razak Syed Zain made a statement a couple of days after Dr Mahathir's remarks. Syed Razak, in an open plea, said the people of Kubang Pasu still needs Dr Mahathir, and want him to remain as MP even if he decides to step down. I am quite sure that Syed Razak was genuine in his plea, though some people argue that he was just being "proper".

Be that as it may, there are doubters who insist on discounting Dr Mahathir's pronouncements on both counts - that he will retire next year, and not seek re-election at the next polls. Some sections of the Opposition like to think that Dr Mahathir's statements are nothing more than political red herrings - to lull them into a state of over-confidence and complacency before the general election.

Across the political divide, some sections of the BN harbour private thoughts. The wishful thinkers want to see Dr Mahathir continue in his present post, and lead the party to victory and the country to global success. The love affair between Dr Mahathir and his loyal believers is far from over as many believe that this is built on a strong foundation of mutually enriching thoughts, deeds and experiences.

On top of that, Dr Mahathir has stamped his personality on the nation, leading the people and country to conquer their greatest fear - that of fear itself. In recent years, Malaysians have conquered Everest, sailed solo around the world, and participated in various world forums, leaving their mark on numerous endeavours.

His recent announcement did not prompt an emotional reaction as when he first declared his wish to exit from the national political landscape. It was a gradual move by the PM to prepare the people and country that he is serious about leaving, to cushion the impact of his pending departure.

But lest everyone forget, and before they are carried away, Dr Mahathir is still the PM, still the uncompromising leader seeking excellence for and from his people, a tenacious leader with an eye for detail, a warm-hearted and kind individual whose intentions are noble and good.

Life is strange sometimes. When Dr Mahathir was named successor by then Prime Minister Tun Hussein Onn, a chorus of fear spread across the country. "What? This ultra-Malay to be Prime Minister?" More than two decades later, a new chorus is heard. "What? Dr M leaving us? It can't be... we need him!" I personally know of individuals who wept in silence, whose tears flowed freely when Dr Mahathir announced that he was not seeking re-election. To many people, Dr Mahathir is the leader they identify with, the father whose brave heart, encouraging words and strong will help them overcome their inner shortcomings to emerge more knowledgeable, confident and resilient.

To many people, Dr Mahathir is their hero. Period. There ought to be an end to speculation as to whether he will or will not step down next year.

He would want everyone to just focus on the task at hand, which is to build a prosperous nation, with caring citizens and an equally big heart to serve the world community.