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It's not time yet for Dr Mahathir to leave Umno and the nation

Shamsul Akmar

FOR a man who had always been seen to have made the right decisions on major things concerning the nation and its direction, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad finally made a "wrong one", at least in the eyes of Umno delegates.

After 21 years as Prime Minister and Umno president, Dr Mahathir, in making the decision to quit, may have forgotten that his life, both personal and public, was not his to decide.

A makcik, in between sobs, said: "He cannot do this; we still need him."

That was the prevailing mood, not only in Merdeka Hall at the Putra World Trade Centre, but in the foyer where non-delegates watched the drama unfold on the big screen during his winding-up speech.

Another makcik, who was crying uncontrollably, said: "Let me see him ... I want to beg him not to resign."

It was not only the women who cried; the men also shed tears.

Others looked dazed while Umno supreme council members appeared shaken as they tried to persuade him to change his mind.

When Umno deputy president Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi announced that Dr Mahathir had agreed to retract his resignation, there were voluble sighs of relief, shouts of "Hidup Mahathir" and other exclamations of support.

However, despite the relief, there was still doubt that he had truly agreed.

After all, the announcement to withdraw the resignation did not come from him.

Secondly, Dr Mahathir is scheduled to go off for a 10-day holiday in Europe.

Until and unless they see him back in office, the nation will still wonder whether he had agreed to stay on.

The announcement by the Prime Minister is probably the most potent shock treatment he could dish out to Malays, especially Umno members.

Malays should ask themselves why they were shocked by the announcement.

Obviously, it is a case that people only know what is good for them when they have it no more.

On that score, the shock, the disbelief and the appeals assured him of a glorious exit.

Why shouldn't it be that way? Would anyone dispute the fact that he had, almost single-handedly, been the architect of a modern Malaysia?

His track record of successfully pulling Malaysia out of two recessions in the 1980s and in 1997 using unconventional measures and against all criticism has made his leadership more than remarkable.

Most Malaysian adults would have grown up with his thoughts, values and ideals, and to them, it is unimaginable not to have him as the leader to provide the answers to the nation's woes.

Said an observer: "Dr Mahathir spoke extensively about Malays having to learn to live without crutches.

"Ironically, Dr Mahathir has become the crutch of the nation."

Dr Mahathir had repeatedly said he would have to go one day, but it seemed the nation and Umno did not believe that the time had come.

In many ways, that is the biggest tribute they can give him.

The next question is why now - when the party seems stronger and more cohesive after the 1998 political crisis?

The international community which had treated him shabbily during the recent political and economic crisis has began to view him in a positive light and many have openly embraced him.

As such, he should be enjoying the glory being heaped upon him but it may be for these very reasons that he chose to announce his resignation.

Some observers feel he may have wanted to leave when he was at his peak, when the party was strong and the nation was heading in the right direction.

There will be detractors, no doubt, who will choose to view the whole episode cynically.

It can be expected that these people will mock it, hoping that it would get to him so that he will then insist on resigning.

To them, without Dr Mahathir around, their dreams of getting closer to power will be much easier to realise.

But surely, after all these years at the helm, he is not going to make his decision based on the views or interest of his opponents.

Even though he has made decisions based on his personal convictions, he must accept that he belongs to Umno and the nation.

On that score, if Umno and the nation do not want him to resign, he has no choice but to accept their views.

The logic is simple: he got into his position because the party wanted him there. With that, if he now wants to go, it would have to be the decision of the party, too.

At the same time, there is no doubt that the party and the nation must accept his request especially after he has given 21 years of his life to the party and the country.

Surely, he deserves to have some time for himself at this stage of his life.

If the Umno leadership discovers that on his return, Dr Mahathir remains adamant about quitting, it will have to figure out other options so as not to lose his services.

If it feels that he has reached a pedestal none of it can attain, then it should create a post of a senior minister or life adviser.

Indeed, he had prior to this said that he would not want to assume the post as a senior minister once he decided to quit.

But as established, he does not have the right to his personal life fully and with that, he cannot make a unilateral decision without considering the demands made by a nation which he has moulded for more than two decades.

The 56th Umno general assembly ended on that note. It is one assembly unlike any other.

All because he made a "wrong decision" - to quit when the nation still needed him.

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