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Letting go, moving on

PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's decision to resign has proven to be irreversible, postponed to October next year at the behest of the people to ensure a smooth transition for his successor, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

It is hard to imagine national life without Dr Mahathir. There is no question that Dr Mahathir is a towering figure. His preoccupations with the creation of a proud, independent and dynamic nation are an act of historical imagination that not only made it possible for us to fathom the nightmares of a downtrodden nation in colonial times but also, to dream the glories of a resurrected nation. The gift of self-esteem, the power of imagination and the means to be all that we can possibly be - Dr Mahathir imparted these to generations of Malaysians. Which explains the people's emotional difficulty in letting him go, for could a father resign from fatherhood?

Hurt and angry as some Malays are at his exposition of "the exposed", the Malays' weaknesses and the challenges he threw them, all will agree that Dr Mahathir penetrated and comprehended the Malay soul in a way no other Malay politician has. It is not only what he did that bestirs the Malay psyche but also, what he was and is. If he made mistakes, there was never a hint of dishonesty, impropriety or gross inefficiency.

The severest critic of Dr Mahathir will be compelled to admire the manner of his going. In the whole history of democratic politics, there are few examples of prime ministers retiring voluntarily at the height of their powers. In his long reign, this is one of the times when his political stature is at a peak in the country and abroad. His Government has rarely seemed more secure. And his health and boundless energy are amazingly good for a man of 76. Indeed, if he wished, as we all do, he could remain in power for many years yet and triumph in another general election.

Based on the party's track record, political finesse and pragmatism, we can expect post-Mahathir Umno to further strengthen its deeply-held values that are deemed to underpin Malaysia's stability and viability. Succession tends to be a thorny issue in political parties everywhere - a situation we avoid, thanks to Dr Mahathir's far-sightedness in appointing Abdullah as his successor.

True, Dr Mahathir will leave Abdullah with a hard act to follow. But Abdullah can hold his own. He is regarded with affection across the political divide. It would be a mistake to underestimate him, as is the case with some who see his Mr Clean and Mr Nice Guy labels as signs that he is indecisive and cautious. Those who remember him from his days as National Operations Council secretary will testify to his firmness, bordering on cowboy toughness. Tough enough to end intra-party spits and spats.

It has been said that personal progression within political parties is determined by the Disraelian adage, "Damn your principles and stick to your party." Possessed of the art of party politics, Abdullah could do both - stick to his principles and party. His faithfulness to principles rather than personal ambition enabled him to ride out political storms with his integrity and political support intact.

Doubtless, Abdullah's integrity wins him the rakyat's confidence and support. Bound together by shared values and mutual responsibilities, Umno

and Barisan Nasional components will readily rally behind Abdullah to ensure the country's continuing progress.

In respecting Dr Mahathir's resignation, it is instructive to note the words of Justice Joseph Story, "What is personal liberty if it does not draw after it the right to enjoy the fruits of our own industry? What is political liberty if it imparts only perpetual poverty to us and all our posterity? What is the privilege of a vote if the majority of the hour may sweep away the earnings of our whole lives?"

Progress and prosperity are now ours. After years of selfless service, Dr Mahathir deserves to enjoy his personal liberty - but only after October 2003.

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