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Succeeding in the politics of succession

Munir Majid

THE most important thing for Umno after Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad steps down as president of the party and as Prime Minister of the country, is to remain united under the leadership of Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, to secure its predominance among the Malays, in Barisan Nasional and in the country.

This, I believe, has been Dr Mahathir's intention and hope, ever since it was worked out that he would retire in October, and not earlier as he intended.

There are still calls for him to change his mind, as among the Malaysian community in Paris the week before last, but as Dr Mahathir responded any reversal of his decision to retire would not be good for the country, the party or for himself.

Such a reversal would inject uncertainty and encourage intrigue over the succession, and would certainly be a setback for Abdullah, unless there is good cause for it.

While it is never safe to say never in politics, it would take an extraordinary set of circumstances, somewhere near a crisis situation, to persuade Dr Mahathir to stay on.

Now, unless it is a crisis that we wish for, it would be best to prepare for the future under Abdullah, with a united Umno.

Calls for Dr Mahathir to stay on, even if not anti-Abdullah, diminish the Deputy Prime Minister by their implication - and this after Dr Mahathir himself has said so many times that he has full confidence in Abdullah as his successor.

Many have got so used to Dr Mahathir being in command that they find change uncomfortable.

From the various reasons for their discomfort, they point to all sorts of reasons for the Prime Minister to stay on - in the process being unfair both to Dr Mahathir and Abdullah, the one wishing to go after so many years of tireless service and the other waiting patiently without presumption even if anointed.

Abdullah has shown great forbearance. Despite being the closest to succeeding Dr Mahathir among all of the Prime Minister's previous deputies, he is still not overstepping the mark by appearing to take charge as long as his boss is around.

This, in turn, attracts the comment that Abdullah is not assertive enough, taking us back to the argument that Dr Mahathir's leadership would be sorely missed.

However, as I have written before, we must give him the chance to prove himself, and that can only happen after he becomes Prime Minister and president of Umno.

We should also trust and respect his political judgment, and the lessons he draws from the failure of Dr Mahathir's previous deputies to succeed.

This is not to say that his abstinence reflects a paucity of thought and ideas of what would be the main issues to be addressed under his leadership.

In my conversations with him, it is clear that the future of education in this country is of abiding interest to him; the need to re-engineer to secure a stable and multi-racial future, to establish a knowledge society to punch our weight in the globalised world; the need to check excess and extremism under the guise of religion.

More immediately, he sees the need to manage risk against the assets held in trust for the community.

He does not push these thoughts as new and radical ideas, but as reflecting a continuity of policy, even if emphasised.

Generally a continuity of policy is accepted as a good thing, but it is sometimes turned against him for not indicating any striking policies that will come under his leadership. Well, damned if you do, damned if you don't.

And then there is this pained concern whether his style of leadership will achieve results in an acceptable time frame, and over the people he would rely on for advice and to implement policy. Well, we all have to wade in, don't we?

Actually, it all comes back to change, which can be disconcerting, especially if you are reliant on being presently comfortably placed.

But with change, there have to be adjustments, but safe in the knowledge that Abdullah is not going to turn you inside out, even if you may not be close to him.

However, will others try to form him in their own image? Many, no doubt, will try to influence him, and there is nothing wrong in this. But Abdullah has been around for a long time, and those trying to use him to carry out their own agenda will be disappointed, even if not sent packing - as Abdullah is not the type who will send them off with their tails between their legs.

On the contrary, he is more likely to just do nothing about what they want, even if he might string them along, if it was politically advisable.

Trying to Divide

ANOTHER ruse has been to look at every decision that Dr Mahathir takes, or every suggestion that he makes, that might indicate less than full confidence in Abdullah which might, furthermore, cause a fissure in relations between the two.

Thus Dr Mahathir's recommendation earlier this year of Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak as Abdullah's deputy, when the time comes, was seen as trying to force the Deputy Prime Minister's hand, apart from being premature.

Actually it is not unknown in Umno for the outgoing leader to indicate his preference of deputy under his successor. Tun Razak, facing an impending untimely death, it is claimed, had left such indication. Under the Tengku, the pecking order after him was evident: Tun Razak, and then Tun Dr Ismail - and so it ensued.

What was striking about Dr Mahathir's indication of his preference is its rather more public nature.

But what was also different were two new factors this time around: the firm but nevertheless long run-in to the succession; and the prospect of a contest to be deputy under Abdullah, which could turn even into a challenge against him if he did not play his card well.

The likelihood of a divisive challenge was established ever since Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah took on Tan Sri (then Datuk) Musa Hitam in 1981; indeed the launching of a serious contest for president is also well possible, again with Tengku Razaleigh making yet another mark on Umno history when he took on Dr Mahathir in 1987.

There is a third factor unique to the situation with Najib.

After Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim's ignominious exit in 1998, the choice of new deputy to Dr Mahathir was essentially between Najib and Abdullah, with Najib hopeful, being the incumbent Umno vice-president with the most number of votes the last time around, although it does not always follow that that is a decisive consideration - Dr Mahathir's own appointment as deputy by Tun Hussein Onn in 1976, over Tengku Razaleigh and Tun (then Encik) Ghafar Baba (and, of course, non-vice president Ghazali Shafie),

proving the point.

Nevertheless, Najib must have felt he was passed over.

Dr Mahathir's voicing of his preference of deputy to Abdullah is, in a sense, a message that it was as simple as that.

If Najib had accepted the possibility only of being successor to Anwar, if things had worked out that way, and that, too, most likely after a long wait, when anything can happen, the prospect of succeeding Abdullah is actually a vast improvement - for Najib personally and for Umno at large.

Dr Mahathir's choice of Abdullah to succeed him is, I believe, based on the need to have a steadying hand well-experienced in administration after the mercurial Anwar, a popular Pak Lah after a populist Pak Sheikh; Abdullah whose political credo is to use popular appeal as a source of stability, rather than to challenge and overturn established order.

The preference for Najib is to buttress that stability within Umno, even as Dr Mahathir leaves centrestage.

I don't think anyone should doubt Dr Mahathir's desire to leave Umno stable and in good hands, and with Abdullah and then Najib, he feels that that would guarantee one generation of good leadership into the year 2020.

In this context, the excitement over whether or not Dr Mahathir had consulted Abdullah before making Datuk Dr Jamaludin Jarjis Second Finance Minister, Tengku Adnan Tengku Mansor Minister in the Prime Minister's Department and Zainuddin Maidin Deputy Minister of Information, is really small political change.

It is pathetic how some can be possessed by the desire to drive a wedge between Dr Mahathir and Abdullah. Dr Mahathir is not a lame duck prime minister and Abdullah is not a hare racing to the finishing line.

The appointment of ministers to the Cabinet is the Prime minister's prerogative; it does not make any difference how many months he has to go, although he may want to inform his deputy before everyone else knows, or even ask him if he had any objection before making the announcement.

It is political mischief to make an issue of known convention of Cabinet Government.

There is no need for Abdullah to be put on the back foot or Dr Mahathir to have to explain anything to anybody.

However, it is crazy to think there is no consultation between the two, and I do know there is on many matters.

Next year Dr Mahathir is scheduled to go on long leave and Abdullah will be in charge.

Again, we can expect the weighing of every decision, assessment of the handling of every important matter, and all sorts of political conclusions.

Well, it is par for the political course, and Abdullah is up to it. If he and his team can work together and Umno remains united, detractors will have to go away to lick their wounds.

In this Age of Terror and so many challenges of the globalised world, we must wish that Dr Mahathir succeeds in his design for a united Umno after him.

Selamat Hari Raya, Maaf Zahir Batin to all Muslim readers.