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Orderly transfer of leadership

THE clear and unambiguous timetable set for the smooth transition of power when Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad steps down is one of the things that make Malaysia special. Few countries, at least in the developing world, have been able to orchestrate an orderly changing of the guard, especially when the change will take place after 22 years.

The timetable, unanimously agreed to by the Umno supreme council and Barisan Nasional component party leaders on Tuesday, looks set to provide yet another unruffled passage through a political watershed resulting from Dr Mahathir's decision to resign from all Government and political posts.

The agenda appears simple and practical enough in a country that has gone through relatively peaceful transitions of power. Dr Mahathir's resignation will take place after the Organisation of Islamic Conference summit in October next year; Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi is confirmed as his successor; between now and the summit, Dr Mahathir will take two months' leave during which Abdullah will be appointed acting president of Umno and acting prime minister and finance minister; and Abdullah will also be acting head of party and Government on any other occasion that Dr Mahathir will be on leave during the period.

Just as the country and Umno had gone through changing phases from the days of Datuk Onn Jaafar's fall from grace, to the country's bloodless way of winning Independence from the British, Tunku Abdul Rahman's resignation in 1970, Tun Abdul Razak's untimely death in office and Tun Hussein Onn's decision to hand over the reins to Dr Mahathir in 1981, the changing of the guard this time will still be the envy of many countries for whom a power shift means tumultuous infighting and anarchy.

Stable transitions do not just depend on the wisdom of political leaders but on the fitness of the country's institutions, particularly the civil service and judiciary. The phased withdrawal by Dr Mahathir will enable the new leaders to ease in for a gradual handover 16 months from now. They will not inherit a fractured polity and an administration that has lost the hearts of the people.

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