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Respecting hierarchy

THE most niggling uncertainty connected with the Prime Minister's retirement appears to have been settled. Umno vice-president and Defence Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak is the likeliest candidate for second-in-command when Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi takes over from Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad next year. That should end speculation of an impending battle royale for the Number 2 position.

Malaysia is perhaps unique among democracies in demanding a clear line of accession for Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister, and Dr Mahathir can do it. Umno encapsulates the hopes and dreams of so many and enjoys such a high level of support among voters that they require a double assurance of the party staying in safe hands well into the future. For that reason, the party has built a peerless tradition of continuity and consensus. Those that break the tradition by contesting out of turn do a great disservice to the party, as well as to their own political careers.

Over more than half a century, Umno has learnt the corporate wisdom of rallying round its chosen leaders. Najib has the right pedigree, popularity, experience and seniority for the job. He has risen steadily up the party ranks, after having been thrust into politics by his father's sudden death. He has demonstrated loyalty, patience and a principle rare among politicians, but necessary in Umno: he has subdued his ambition for the greater good of party unity. Umno will maintain its support and integrity if it adheres scrupulously to hierarchy, and Najib's appointment will ensure that it does.