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Tears of tribute to Dr Mahathir

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IT was an ironic twist of fate when Pas president Datuk Fadzil Noor died on June 23, fewer than 24 hours after Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad announced his resignation.

Suddenly, two of the leading Malay-based political parties in the nation lost their top leaders who had, between them, shaped and provided the direction for their party members for three decades.

Even though Fadzil's death strongly affected friends and foes, it was Dr Mahathir's announcement to resign which shocked the nation.

There are several reasons why it was shocking for his supporters and detractors.

To his fans, the leadership he provided will not be easily emulated by other leaders and they want him to remain as the Prime Minister for as long as it takes.

For his critics, his announcement to resign only proved them wrong, for they had insisted that he planned to die in office.

It can then be said that he proved his critics wrong but at the expense of his supporters.

However, such thoughts will be laid to rest as time progresses and the 15-month transition period before he is scheduled to step down will be a testing time for his successor-designate Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi as well as Umno and Barisan Nasional.

Like it or not, and rightly or otherwise, much of the nation's progress is tied to Dr Mahathir.

Forget about development programmes and his vision of how the nation should be in 2020, even day-to-day politics is much centred on him.

Be it political Islam vis-a-vis Umno vs Pas, the Malay divide and the fight against terrorism, it seems he had been the one taking the issues by the horn.

If Malay Muslim political issues are insufficient, even Chinese politics, in this case the feuding Team A and B in the MCA, was thrust on him.

The question that begs answers is how will the nation be when he is no more in office? Things like how will Umno/Pas relations be, how will the MCA and the rest of the BN components deal with Umno and what kind of politics will evolve in the post-Mahathir era.

Acting Pas President Datuk Seri Abdul Hadi Awang did not see much changes in Umno/Pas battle for political supremacy.

"Individuals come and go but party policies remain the same. Dr Mahathir may go but the policies and principles in Umno will not change.

"That being the case, I do not see why there will be a different way of Pas dealing with Umno and vice versa."

Though Abdul Hadi may be giving his views on the changes in the Umno leadership, he is also reflecting on the changes in the Pas leadership.

If Abdullah will have to figure out how to fill Dr Mahathir's shoes in 15 months, Abdul Hadi is in Fadzil's shoes and as it is, he is facing perceptions that he is going to turn Pas into a more extreme party.

While Abdul Hadi will have to face the comparison with Fadzil, deemed the more moderate Pas leader, Abdullah too will face comparison in terms of his character and leadership style to that of Dr Mahathir.

Given the fact that Dr Mahathir is a forceful character and has been at the helm for 21 years, Abdullah will not be spared the scrutiny.

In many ways than not, Abdullah is less lucky compared with Abdul Hadi. While Abdul Hadi is only inheriting Pas and the Terengganu State Government, Abdullah is getting the burden of managing the nation; Umno which is a lumbering giant of a party; and the chairmanship of BN, which is facing defining moments in multi-racial co-existence. To be fair, Abdullah and Dr Mahathir are poles apart in leadership style.

While Dr Mahathir is blunt, does not mince his words, prepared to criticise sacred cows like ulama and the institution they represent, Abdullah is viewed to be more diplomatic, less forceful and sparing in his criticisms.

His detractors view these characters as flaws and that is a reflection of him being weak, lacking in ideas and will be less of a leader than Dr Mahathir.

However, for his supporters, Abdullah will herald a different era for Malaysia after the roller-coaster ride under Dr Mahathir's leadership.

There is no doubt that Dr Mahathir, much as he had paved the way for a sense of pride and equal to the West, he had also made enemies due to his forthright views, which are mostly unpalatable to the targets.

What can be expected of Abdullah's leadership is a time of consolidation after Dr Mahathir had "forced" his ideas and visions on others.

Then there is concern that he may not be as strong a leader as Dr Mahathir in dealing with an Umno which faces disenchanted Malays.

To this, his supporters believe that Umno has a tradition, if it can be called one - when the leader is strong, the party tends to be weak and when the leader is weak, then the party becomes strong.

Whatever the circumstances may be and the bleak picture painted by pessimists, Abdullah should be able to hold his own. In fact, if the Umno and BN tradition is anything to go by, there should not be too much concern over the change.

If anything, to believe that the nation will struggle to keep its seams from bursting is the biggest disrespect to Dr Mahathir.

Surely, if the nation believes that Dr Mahathir has the wisdom and vision, then, his decision to resign in October next year would have been made after evaluating every aspect of the nation's well-being.

To dispute his choice of successor will further insult his legacy for the least he can do is to ensure the nation is left in good hands.

Otherwise, not only will nation and Abdullah suffer, Dr Mahathir will be remembered, not for the good he had done for the country, but rather for leaving the nation in a lurch for the lack of a good succession plan.

On that score, those who dispute Abdullah as Dr Mahathir's choice are disputing the latter's wisdom which they had themselves acknowledged and paid tribute repeatedly.

Because of that, much as tears may still be shed come October next year, they should be those in tribute of Dr Mahathir for all that he had done and in sadness for the loss of a leader with special qualities.

They should not be tears of uncertainties, fear nor loss of guidance. Only then can the nation prevail.

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