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The Mahathir way

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WHEN Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad made his shocking announcement to quit, the Opposition, using their access to the Internet, immediately seized the occasion to accuse him of engaging in sandiwara (play-acting).

That was only to be expected. When they cannot comprehend a situation or when they think there is political mileage to be gained, they give it the sandiwara label.

And what can be more dramatic than Dr Mahathir tearfully announcing his resignation from party and all other related posts, and Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, an hour later, announcing that the Umno Supreme Council had prevailed upon him to stay on?

Sandiwara has been the Opposition's standard reaction to things that they refuse to accept, or which they have no coherent response to. Thus, even when army camps were raided, weapons stolen and people tortured and killed, the Opposition, in particular Pas, called it sandiwara. They have little or no respect for facts and for lives.

The commentators, on the other hand, may see in Dr Mahathir's surprise announcement a brilliant piece of political manoeuvre. Why not? He made it on live television. He had the ears of the Umno delegates. And it was the end of yet another successful general assembly.

Until RTM abruptly ended live transmission, the whole country could see the drama unfolding before their very eyes - the sober winding-up speech, the unexpected announcement, the shock waves it created, the tears and the spontaneous pleas for him to change his mind.

Having said all that, and guided by what happened in the following four days, it was clear that Dr Mahathir was more than serious about retiring. He agreed to stay but with conditions. He named Abdullah his successor in the government and party, he set the date for his departure and spelt out ways in which he and Abdullah would share responsibilities in the meantime.

The uncertainty concerning Dr Mahathir's retirement is over. He is doing so in 16 months. There is no sandiwara to it. But the puzzle remains as to why the Prime Minister had decided to announce his retirement the way he did on June 22.

Despite the Supreme Council's assertion that there was nothing amiss, the surprise announcement was untypical of Dr Mahathir. We must still pause and ask why. Dr Mahathir is no doubt a master tactician. He is, to borrow the title of a Sidney Sheldon novel, a Master Of The Game. (Incidentally, Sheldon is one of Dr Mahathir's favourite authors.)

Shocking people has been his trademark. In the first few years of his stewardship, he subjected the nation to many 'shock treatments': the Buy-British-Last, the Look East Policy and the dawn raid on the London Stock Exchange by Permodalan Nasional Bhd to gain control of Guthrie, to name a few (see story on Dr Mahathir's key policies on page 28). He later told the Press that these and any other bold moves were necessary to wake up the people and to prove to them that Malaysia Boleh.

But announcing his resignation after 21 years at the helm of the party and government was not something that he would do for mere effect. Yes, he is controversial. He is not averse to pushing the limits. But that does not include fooling around with the country's future.

Running a successful political party, government and country like he did

in the last two decades was not a sandiwara. Thus, while the Opposition parties and a host of Mahathir-haters understandably seized the opportunity to malign him, his supporters, assuming that they understand him, should know that he was serious in making the announcement.

Having just spoken about the success and independence of the country, of the good rating the economy was getting and the future that held considerable promise, Dr Mahathir was not about to put a spanner in the works. He was not about to demolish his own creation. Thus, the successful attempt to influence him to change his mind - including by the Supreme Council - must be seen in that context.

While the attempt by the Supreme Council to explain the Prime Minister's decision, as it did on June 25, was commendable, most people would still like to hear it from Dr Mahathir himself. Hopefully he will do just that when the time is appropriate.

Many now believe that he would have explained his decision had he been given the chance. Unfortunately, he was interrupted by several members of the Supreme Council who rushed to surround him at the instance he made the announcement.

It is unthinkable that the man, famous for his attention to detail and for his ability to explain the most difficult subjects in layman's terms, would neglect to explain the rationale for his resignation.

According to aides, he had a hand-written note with him at the point of making the announcement. But his words came as a shock and turned into a major controversy because he was not given the opportunity to finish. He was so rudely interrupted that he did not even have the opportunity to wish delegates goodbye and Godspeed as he did year after year. In fact, he could not even say his salam.

Thus, who is to be blamed when the managing director of a Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange main board company was disappointed with Dr Mahathir for not explaining his decision? Would anybody care to give him the benefit of the doubt that he might even have endorsed his successor and ask the assembly to support him, had he been able to finish his speech?

As it turned out, he did exactly that, albeit behind closed doors. It would have been better had he said it himself to the delegates and the live television audience.

The only thing we heard from him before his voice was drowned by the pleading, sobbing and the general commotion was: 'No, no, I have decided, I have decided ... long time ago ... dah lama dah.'

And that 'long ago', if we care to recall, was way back in the late nineties. He had then planned to leave by 2000 but was held back by the events of 1998 that led to the sacking of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim from the party and government.

Most of us heard what Dr Mahathir had to say about his plan but very few were willing to listen. We are so used to living under Mahathir Mohamad - liking him most of the time and hating him occasionally - we forget that the man has been around for more than two decades. In all, he has been in politics for more than six decades.

Twenty-one years at the top is a long time. Even by Dr Mahathir's get-up-and-go standard. It is not rare for him to cross several time zones and work as much as 24 hours at a stretch. To force him to stay on and not wanting to accept the fact that he must, at some point of time, step down, is to expect the impossible. We are being selfish.

Yes, 'dah lama dah' does not in any way mean that he cannot continue to serve. He can. Events following the 1997 Asian financial crisis, the 1998 Umno crisis and the Sept 11 attack on the United States have shown that he gets better with time. Against all odds, he nursed the economy back to health, strengthened Umno and the government, did the unthinkable by

introducing meritocracy in university admission, reintroduced English as the medium of instruction for selected school subjects and lifted Malaysia's profile in the global economic and political arena.

But this cannot go on forever - not even when the 76-year-old medical doctor from Kedah can outpace much younger men in almost everything he does. He must be given the right to make up his mind the way he has been giving Umno and the Malays the right to determine their future. Let him take the much needed rest. Whether he is sailing the Adriatic or pounding the streets of London, he deserves the rest. Staying at home, he can never do so.

If 21 years of Mahathir means anything at all to us, we must respect his decision. If we acknowledge his achievements, we must keep his legacy alive. Never mind if he says he does not care whether he is remembered or not.

In his winding-up speech at the assembly, he urged the Malays to walk without the support of a tongkat (walking stick). And by any definition, Dr Mahathir has for 21 years been that tongkat.

It is an insult to him if Umno and Barisan Nasional leaders still lack confidence to continue to build the country on the strong foundation that he has laid down. Having prevailed upon him to stay on, the Supreme Council is totally and unequivocally responsible for whatever happens next. More so now that the crucial stage of succession - the naming of the successor - has been done.