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Tradition rules

Abdul Razak Chik

NOW that Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has confirmed Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi as his successor to the Umno presidency, all eyes will be on who will take over as the deputy when the time comes.

Going by tradition, it should be one of the three Umno vice-presidents. Political observers say it is likely to be Defence Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak. At the last party elections, Najib managed to garner the highest number of votes, outpacing fellow vice-presidents Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin and Tan Sri Muhammad Mohamad Taib.

However, should there be party polls before October next year - the date when Dr Mahathir will step down - Abdullah will probably choose from one of the three vice-presidents elected then.

With respect to the Prime Minister's post, it is by convention held by the Umno president. In some ways, when Abdullah takes over the post from Dr Mahathir next year, he would have broken the mould set by three previous Deputy Prime Ministers - Tan Sri Musa Hitam, Tun Ghafar Baba and Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim - who all failed to move up to the coveted position.

Succession to the Umno presidency - and Prime Ministership - has always been a smooth affair, with the tradition of consensus the avowed main driver.

Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra had the distinction of being the first Alliance (the forerunner of the Barisan Nasional) president. When he felt he could not continue as Prime Minister after the May 13, 1969 riots, he passed the mantle to his deputy Tun Abdul Razak.

Tun Abdul Razak became Malaysia's second Prime Minister in 1970, going on to launch the New Economic Policy (NEP) with the avowed aim of overcoming the problems of poverty and societal imbalances identified as the root cause of the May 13 riots. He brought about the formation of the BN. More importantly, Tun Razak's nation-building legacy earned him the sobriquet Bapa Pembangunan (Father of Development).

The nation mourned when he died of leukaemia in London in 1976. Once again, succession was smooth as his deputy Tun Hussein Onn moved up to become Malaysia's third Prime Minister.

In 1981, Tun Hussein, who had earlier chosen Dr Mahathir as his deputy, resigned due to ill health. This paved the way for Dr Mahathir to become the fourth Prime Minister.

Now, 21 years on, the cycle looks set to continue, with Abdullah taking over.