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A short, sharp shock of brutal reality from Dr Mahathir

Rehman Rashid

JUST after 6pm on the final day of the 56th Umno general assembly, at the end of his winding-up speech, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad dissolved into tears, announced his resignation from the party presidency and his chairmanship of the Barisan Nasional, and left the stage.

A stunned silence settled on the Dewan Merdeka for a fraction of a second. Then, uproar, as the assembly leapt as one to its feet. Speaker Tun Sulaiman Ninam Shah appealed in vain for calm as Dr Mahathir was swarmed by party leaders and delegates pleading with him to reconsider.

Umno deputy president Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi took to the podium to declare - his voice more stentorian than this reporter had ever heard - that the assembly rejected Dr Mahathir's resignation. He was echoed minutes later by the Speaker.

But the president and Prime Minister had left the hall, leaving the watching nation to absorb the stunning development.

After more than 21 years in office, his resignation and retirement may have been expected but, obviously, never anticipated. Nothing in his keynote or closing addresses, or indeed in the proceedings of the assembly until that moment had telegraphed such an intention.

Personally, he was in robust good health. Politically, he was as unassailable in his own party as on the national stage. As a statesman, he had risen to a global eminence surpassing that of any of his predecessors. Philosophically, however, his dramatic resignation, catching everyone by surprise as it did, cast a cold and glaring light on the misgivings and grievances he had articulated in the days and weeks leading up to this assembly.

It wasn't a political enemy, nor a national socio-economic challenge, nor the vituperation of the masses that defeated him. These he has faced, and stared down, many times. It was, instead, a more systemic and insidious foe. Dr Mahathir's nemesis was a mindset: the persistent malaise of the Malays that had led him to declare that his entire career, from the J'accuse of The Malay Dilemma through the resolve of The Way Forward to his stature today, has been a failure.

The matters of Malay resistance to meritocracy and competitiveness, the insistent return to mediaevalist religiosity as advocated by the likes of Pas against the bloated complacency of self-satisfied Malays grown fat and lazy on preferential policies and official protection - these were the adversaries before which Dr Mahathir threw in the towel.

In the fraught hour after Dr Mahathir's resignation, Malaysia pivoted giddily on its head. Even as the assembly dissolved into cheering applause upon Abdullah's relieved announcement that Dr Mahathir had been persuaded to stay on in all offices, the writing, however, blazed on the wall. Umno is not to take itself, its leadership of the Malays and Malaysia, and its president, for granted. The assembly's predictable support for his ideas had better be drilled down from lip-service to heartfelt sincerity and action.

And, no, contrary to both his admirers and detractors, he is not likely to remain Umno president, Barisan Nasional chairman and Prime Minister for life.

For an unmatched sixth general election victory, maybe.

What may or may not come after will depend to a grave extent on whether or not, when the time finally comes for Dr Mahathir to retire for real and

good, he can do so feeling that his life's work has not been without some success.