

New blood, new plans for polls

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The political transition from Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi is moving very smoothly into its final month amid renewed speculation of early polls, writes JCKEUNE TAN

With just a little over a month more to go, it is clear that the political transition is well in progress.

The formal handing over of the reins is scheduled for the last day of October and the last few months have seen the country's two top men maintain a schedule that would have left others half their age catching their breath.

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad traversed a total of four western capitals last week, taking off to deliver a lecture in London just hours after a big indoor rally to celebrate the Barisan Nasional's 50th anniversary.

His deputy Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi has just spent a tightly-packed five days in China during which he met the Republic's top leaders.

The Deputy Prime Minister has also called on a number of Asian states in preparation for the transition. Apart from China, he has met with leaders in Singapore, Indonesia, the Philippines, Brunei, Thailand and Japan.

In between all this travelling, both men have had to deal with a slew of domestic appointments and responsibilities.

Many of the requests on Dr Mahathir's time have centred around the somewhat sentimental fact that this, being his final months in office, various groups and individuals wish to have him honour their function so that they can thank him or say goodbye in their own way.

This extraordinary man has had his share of detractors but he evidently has more than his share of admirers after 22 years in power.

Many have also noted how Dr

Mahathir has begun to openly introduce Abdullah as the next Prime Minister at a number of functions.

During the Barisan rally at the Stadium Merdeka a week ago, he explicitly asked Malaysians to throw their support behind Abdullah as the country's fifth Prime Minister.

"He is my successor and he will lead the Barisan. What we have promised, we will continue to deliver under Abdullah," he said in his speech as the Barisan chairman.

The Barisan gathering was as much an avenue for the coalition to pay tribute to the out-going Prime Minister as it was to 'affirm support for the incoming Premier.

Dr Mahathir also said: "At the end of October, I will relinquish the post happily because there is a successor. There is no power struggle among us."

And that perhaps is one of the more unique aspects of the political transition, that it is taking place without a tussle for power and control. In fact, it will go down in history as the smoothest leadership transition in Umno history.

"It's a healthy succession plan that has not disrupted the party or the country. As an Umno man, I feel very proud about the way it has happened," said Umno Youth exco member Norza Zakaria.

Over the last one year, Abdullah has also assumed more responsibilities both in the government as well as the party.

Abdullah's state visits to the Asean states and China were basically a sort of introductory call by an incoming leader, to send the message that there will be continued good relations after

the transition and that he intends to carry on with the bilateral ties and arrangements set in place by the previous administration.

The Prime Minister has also made it clear that he will not be leading the Barisan into the next general election.

It will be entirely Abdullah's call — he will captain the Barisan, call the elections and decide on the candidates.

And that may explain why the crowds around him keep growing, whether he is touching base in his Kepala Bataş constituency, at the KLIA where he is going and coming home from abroad or at political functions.

During his China trip, one titled Malaysian corporate figure apparently showed up at the China World Hotel where Abdullah and his entourage were putting up and managed to catch the Deputy Prime Minister's attention and to shake his hand.

The corporate man was not seen again for the rest of the trip and was said to have flown straight home after that. He only wanted to be seen by Abdullah or, as some of those in the entourage suggested, to earn brownie points with the soon-to-be Prime Minister.

Despite all these clear indications of a transition in progress, there are still — and incredibly so — people in the opposition camp who do not believe that Dr Mahathir is preparing to call it a day.

PAS president Datuk Seri Hadi Awang is apparently one of them.

In his policy speech at the PAS *muktamar* earlier this month, Hadi said: "The change of guards, if it ever is going to happen, has left many in a

kind of dilemma. While Mahathir is notorious for his authoritarianism, his final exit has yet to be ascertained. Judging from the past, no one can really swear that it is going to happen this time around."

Apparently, many in PAS find it hard to believe that Dr Mahathir is in the process of letting go of power so readily.

"I still think he has a Plan B, which is how to stay on," said PAS MP for Kubang Krian Husam Musa.

Others like Kedah lawyer Ibrahim Soffian who has close ties with PAS think that a man who is planning to retire would not be travelling the way Dr Mahathir has been doing the last one year.

"I still think there is only a 50:50 chance of him going," said Ibrahim.

Their disbelief has to do with their ingrained resistance to statements and information coming from Umno or even the mainstream media. They see it as propaganda.

In fact, newspapers, TV and radio are not the main sources of information for many PAS supporters. For instance, there were dozens of stalls around the PAS headquarters in Taman Melewar during the party *muktamar*. They sold items from food and aphrodisiacal pills to crockery and clothes, but not a single one of them sold newspapers.

"These people are just plain scared of the prospect of facing a new man at the top. They know voters will be willing to give Pak Lah a chance and he's coming in with sound credentials," said Datuk Wan Farid Wan Salleh, deputy head of Umno's Kuala Terengganu division.

But the more seasoned and rational among the opposition politicians have come around to the reality.

"Initially I thought it was a *sandi-wara*. They just kept saying it will be October, that he will go after the OIC Summit. But was it one month after or one year after, or what? But now, I believe he is ready to go," said Ronnie Liu, DAP's national publicity secretary.

PAS' Subky Abdul Latif claimed he believed Dr Mahathir right from that tearful announcement 16 months ago. Subky heard it on the radio while he was on the way to the hospital to see his ailing party president who passed away shortly after.

"My political instincts told me he meant it," said the PAS veteran who is a keen observer of the politics of Dr Mahathir.

As the transition draws to its final conclusion, talk of an early election has resurfaced.

Here again, views differ. Those who are adamant that Dr Mahathir will linger on, imagine that polls may happen as soon as next month but the majority have their prediction on the first quarter of next year.

In fact, the election jitters hit Sabah months earlier. Chief Minister Datuk Musa Aman only has to go to Putrajaya for a meeting for a new wave of speculation that state polls are about to be called.

DAP's Liu said: "They say Dr Mahathir is a liability to Umno and an easy target for us. But I think he is the most difficult enemy we have ever faced — so shrewd and hard to read."

Abdullah has not let on even the slightest hint on the polls date. But broad hints have been dropped about

the sort of line-up he has in mind.

In Penang a few days ago, he said that only people with integrity and who were sincere in wanting to serve the rakyat should consider contesting the elections.

Aides to Abdullah have suggested there will be a healthy dose of young, energetic and qualified faces alongside experienced incumbents in the line-up. He is seeking a convincing mandate, and for that he needs candidates with a winning streak — people with credibility, who are capable and can perform and, very important, people who have no cumbersome baggage.

Said one top aide: "Pak Lah has said to us that he is going to put up winning candidates even if they are not division chiefs. He is aware that the people are fed-up of certain people and they will only vote for people who are credible.

It's going to be a big shock to the system but he is not going to play to the warlords or entrenched interests.

"He is not going to change for the sake of change but he is going to be very strategic. He is going to sit down and see who are the ones who will take the election home for the Barisan. And if the combination has to be 50% new and 50% old faces then that is going to be the combination."

Abdullah has been the perfect deputy to Dr Mahathir, assiduous about not stepping out of place. But he has also made good use of the long transition to think and plan ahead to ensure the survival of his party, Umno, and that of the ruling coalition.

And the sceptics in the opposition had better believe that.