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A fresh perspective

A Kadir Jasin

ONE OF THE most important decisions taken by Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad when he became prime minister in 1981 was to continue with the leadership line-up left behind by his predecessor, Tun Hussein Onn.

He did not reshuffle the Cabinet until after the general election. After the 1982 general election, two ministers `left' the Cabinet. They were Foreign Minister Tan Sri Mohd Ghazali Shafie, who was openly hostile to him, and Agriculture Minister Datuk Abdul Manan Othman.

Ghazali, better known as `King Ghaz' for his extensive power and demanding attitude as Home Affairs Minister in the Tun Razak and Tun Hussein Cabinets, was seen as trying to sabotage Dr Mahathir's ascendancy by arresting his political secretary Sidik Ghouse on allegations of spying for the Russians just days before Dr Mahathir was to become prime minister.

As for Abdul Manan, a close ally of Tun Hussein and a good friend of Tun Daim Zainuddin (who would later serve Dr Mahathir twice as Finance Minister), he was blamed for mishandling the introduction of the padi price subsidy that led to one of the largest demonstrations by rice farmers the country had even seen.

It took place in front of the state secretariat in Alor Star. The mishandling of the subsidy, which is still in force today, had been blamed for providing PAS the impetus to strengthen its challenge against the Barisan Nasional (BN) in Kedah and other rice-growing states, namely, Kelantan, Terengganu and Perlis.

Dr Mahathir started to stamp his mark on the Umno leadership and the government only during the 1982 general election when many new faces, including Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, were brought in to contest in key constituencies.

Like Anwar, many of them were young and inexperienced. But Dr Mahathir took the risk of fielding and later appointing them to important posts.

In the desire to build his own team and launch his `think big' programmes, he gave almost unlimited power to his deputy Tan Sri Musa Hitam. Whenever he left the country, Musa was proclaimed Acting Prime Minister.

His administration was soon dubbed the `2M' administration - Mahathir and Musa. For at least five years, he was taken up by the mantra although he himself often said it was a slogan created by the Press.

But in many ways Dr Mahathir and Musa were incompatible. While Dr Mahathir was driven by his commitment to his dreams and schemes, anything from the `Buy British Last' policy to the `Look East' policy and the national car project, Musa was well-known for his cynicism and skepticism.

The differences blew open in 1986 with Musa announcing his resignation citing irreconcilable differences with Dr Mahathir.

Although there were other casualties along the way, most of the people he brought in and those he inherited from Tun Hussein's administration are still around. Thus, if they were 30 years old when Dr Mahathir became prime minister, today they would be 52. If they were then 40, they would be today 62. They literally grew old with his administration.