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Abdullah must rise above politics and embrace only the best

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THE electoral constituency re-delineation exercise can prove to be awkward for the political parties, especially Umno.

Additionally, once the Prime Minister gives up office in the Government and the party, which is scheduled for October this year, a leadership conundrum surfaces.

In October, all things being equal, the Deputy Prime Minister will become Prime Minister.

He is expected to appoint a deputy.

By that time, too, apart from the supreme council, the party, if the supreme council has so decided, will no longer have elected officials at the divisional and branch levels.

Instead, as a result of the redrawing of the constituency boundaries, the current committees will have been dissolved, and protem committees appointed in their stead. The latter will run the branches and divisions until the next party elections.

In all likelihood they will also see the party through the next general election.

The Deputy Prime Minister is Umno's deputy president. When Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad relinquishes his party post, his deputy will step in as acting president until the next party elections when he will be either endorsed as president or, if challenged, elected to the presidency by the delegates.

Until such time, the party will have in Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi both a deputy president and an acting president.

Herein is the conundrum.

For, if Abdullah gives up the deputy presidency of the party he gives up the basis upon which he becomes acting president. Without the acting presidency he is not Prime Minister.

Thus is proscribed what is proscribed: whoever is appointed the Deputy Prime Minister will not be the party's deputy president. Which makes the current deputy president a mighty powerful figure, indeed, after October.

Prior to that, the current supreme council would have put in place the 165 plus 25 protem committees as the interim local players.

Given the nature of politics and the predisposition of those appointed to stay in power, the deputy president cum acting president will have reasonable liberty to put his stamp on the party.

Which, in turn, should make for his undivided attention to ensuring an overwhelming victory for the Barisan Nasional in the general election.

All he will mostly need is the full support of his Cabinet, a Cabinet that is effective in providing the necessary confidence which would be sorely needed by the post-Mahathir administration.

Going to the country after October, however, will inevitably be a rushed decision. Abdullah will inherit a Parliament that is almost four years old.

That leaves him with just 12 months in which to call for an election and seek a fresh mandate from the people. His options will be limited by time and exacerbated by a sluggish global economy.

Time will also be against him in terms of building his credibility as Prime Minister, a task made more difficult by the mantle he inherits because his predecessor is a figure larger than life.

Dr Mahathir, an international statesman, leaves behind a reputation as

the nation's planner, builder and protector. A hard act to follow but, somewhat ameliorated by the fact that the successor is a long-standing Minister, having held several major portfolios in Dr Mahathir's many Cabinets.

Nevertheless, the new Prime Minister returns to the people struggling to regain the mandate of the electorate of Kelantan and Terengganu. In Kedah, too, the opposition made inroads in the last general election.

Not quite with the track record of his former boss and deprived of a honeymoon period, Abdullah must come up with a novel strategy to win over the hearts and minds of the people.

Like the Prime Minister he will insist on a united Umno. Unfortunately for him, after the August gazette of the re-delineation, every party position at the local level is, technically at least, up for grabs.

Some hopefuls will try to exploit the situation by foiling the ambitions of members of the appointed protem committees.

In short, the jockeying for power could easily get out of hand. How can this be avoided? Or, in the event that these party follies are unavoidable, how can he reduce his Government's dependence on the party to win votes?

When the party's problems are compounded by a post-Mahathir reconstruction, only one factor remains to be seriously considered: the new Prime Minister must make his Government attractive to the voters.

He must imbue into his Government a measure of confidence that no opposition can hobble. Not an easy task by any stretch of the imagination but surely not impossible.

If the re-delineation exercise is seen as an opportunity to rebuild the party, the democratic process must be left to take its course. To stifle democracy is to not allow the emergence of a new generation of leaders.

Therefore, despite the approaching general election the party must be left to sort its local leadership line-up free of unnecessary interference from the national leadership. This should be true for all BN component parties.

But, how does one build a Government of high public esteem in a short time?

Abdullah has one huge advantage: his hands are not tied by the party. Apart from the supreme council all other party officials are appointees.

He can exercise much greater choice in forming his Cabinet. He can, if he wants, have a Cabinet of politicians known for their ability, integrity and respectability.

By so doing, the new Prime Minister would be signalling his intention clearly to the country. He will take Dr Mahathir's legacy, work with it and take it to new heights.

The circumstances are opportune and the time is right. Malaysia's next Prime Minister has fate with him. All he need do is to rise above politics and embrace only the best.

Why? Because alone he cannot make his point quickly enough. With the right people, however, he can put his stamp on the country, overnight.