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Better a lame duck than voracious tiger in serving nation's interest

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IT has always been the case of being lame ducks or being perceived as being greedy for power.

Amid such thoughts, there used to be a reluctance among Malaysian political parties to discuss or debate the idea of limiting the years or terms of their organisation's presidency.

Such reluctance applied not only to the ruling parties but also to those in the Opposition.

The MCA proposal to limit the party's presidency to nine years or three terms is a truly new development in so far as Malaysian party politics is concerned.

It may be argued that the MCA came up with the idea, which still needs to be endorsed by delegates at its general assembly, due to its unsavoury experience with previous leaders.

For ordinary folk, limiting the term of office for party presidents, which in effect will limit their term in office or government posts, means that politicians do not see their positions as something they should hold for life.

The simple reason why the public does not want a politician to remain in office for life is to ensure others are given the chance to lead.

It is also to ensure that no politician channels all his or her focus towards remaining in office to the extent of ignoring or forgetting the reasons why the individual was elected in the first place.

Apart from that, some leaders may be bad at governing but good in political powerplay, so much so that they may remain in office even though they have outlived their usefulness.

If the limit on years or terms of presidency takes effect, the party system will be able to keep tabs on a politician if the polls and voting processes are unable to remove a "rogue" politician.

This is especially true in Malaysia where, when the public does not participate directly in the election of the Prime Minister as the candidate will come from the party which commands the support of the majority in Parliament.

Then, the choice of Cabinet members is also accorded along party lines meaning they are chosen from among the presidents of component parties.

This means that for as long as the politician remains the president of the party, he or she can be assured of a Cabinet post or that of Chief Minister.

These are by convention. But the fact remains that ever since Independence, the distribution of Cabinet posts, apart from the ones held by Umno as the leading party in the Barisan Nasional, presidents of the MCA, MIC, Gerakan, the main allies in peninsula politics, are all members of the Cabinet.

Then there are the presidents of political parties from Sabah and Sarawak which will also have a place in the Cabinet apart from becoming the chief ministers of the two States.

While these are reflections of how the co-alition system of governance has been able to work out a fair distribution of power and positions, it sometimes has its failings.

One of it is that the Cabinet has to accommodate an ineffective member just because he is the president of a component partner.

With that in mind and the fact that the ordinary Malaysian does not have

a direct say in who should remain a Cabinet minister or otherwise, then the party itself, by coming up with the proviso of limiting the term of its president will help provide check and balance.

Of course, all these thoughts are based on much distrust of politicians being able to give up the trappings of power in the interest of the nation.

Such distrust and suspicion are well reflected when Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad announced his decision to resign from party and government posts during the party general assembly last year.

With that decision, he managed to prove his detractors wrong.

Those who love him, were disturbed by his decision, but for his detractors, even until today, despite repeatedly saying he is firm about his decision to leave office in October, they still refuse to believe it.

The disbelief is not difficult to figure out as such a sentiment is shared among those who had predicted that Dr Mahathir wanted to die in office and that all that he had done prior to this was purely to ensure that his position would not be challenged.

To believe his intention now means having to accept that they were wrong in their assessments and that is something which may be politically unprofitable.

Dr Mahathir's voluntary resignation is very much in the tradition of Umno.

All Umno presidents have never been removed from position but resigned before their terms were up; the exception was Tun Abdul Razak who died while serving his second term.

Despite that, is it time that Umno too started looking at the need to limit the term of office of its president?

The next question is whether such provisions will enhance the democratic system in the party?

Even though the Umno tradition has worked well in terms of serving the nation surely, there is nothing wrong to introduce provisions which may improve its image and ensure the democratic process in the party flourishes further.

But such need should not only apply to Umno and the BN component parties.

It should also be emulated by the Opposition parties. Some of their top leaders have been in power, much longer than some BN components.

It can, of course, be argued that as long as they are not in Government, their leaders will not be able to be corrupted by power.

But on the other hand, if they are keen to be seen as an alternative to the BN and its components, surely, they should be in the forefront to prove that their leaders are not those too keen to hold on to power.

Furthermore, such arguments are no more valid as Pas leaders head two State Governments, meaning that the party should install the checks in its party system if it is unable to incorporate the term-limit in the State constitution.

Since Pas and the other Opposition parties have been the most vocal in accusing Umno and other BN leaders of being power crazy and wanting to die in office, similar rules should also apply to them.

And that means what is good for the goose should also be good for the gander.

The next thing is about becoming lame ducks if the term of office for leaders is already pre-determined.

Dr Mahathir has proven, despite everyone knowing that he will resign by October, he is no lame duck and looks set to be stronger and able to shape the nation until his last day in office.

There will, however, not be another Dr Mahathir.

For future leaders of the nation, surely it is better to be lame ducks than voracious tigers which feed on power.

And yet, the heart is small and meek when it comes to the interest of the nation.