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Bowing out, unbowed

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AJOURNALIST narrated an encounter with Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad at a Press conference in 1996.

"He was bending down and I noticed the label on his jacket coat. I said to him: `Not bad, Sparkmanshop.'

"He turned around and gave a cheeky smile, then said: `You should see the Cerruttis and Zegnas that my deputy and Cabinet ministers wear.'"

Journalists who have covered Dr Mahathir during his 22 years as the Prime Minister have anecdotes of their own. Witty, or dripping with sarcasm, all are gems.

There is no doubt that he will be missed by admirers and detractors alike.

And if he lives up to his promise to share his thoughts with the international community more bluntly and directly than ever, then we could find ourselves living in some interesting times.

Dr Mahathir will be leaving behind a legacy which will only require his successors to pursue. His act will not be easy to emulate and it will be a long time, if ever, before any other Malaysian leader reaches the heights he did.

His decision to step down as Prime Minister was unconventional for a politician. Public perception is that politicians cling to power, preferring to die in office or be booted out kicking and screaming in a power struggle.

The only other leader in this region to step down while maintaining his grip on power is Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew, though it's arguable he left to make room for son Lee Hsien Loong who is now set to take over the prime ministership from Goh Chok Tong.

Dr Mahathir is retiring at a time when his adversaries are far over the horizon, when his is a leading voice in the Muslim and Third World countries.

The mantle has fallen on Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

At the top of his things-to-do list is the naming of his deputy in the Government.

That is likely to be Umno vice-president Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak.

He was, after all, the person Dr Mahathir thought was the most suitable to be the next Deputy Prime Minister.

To some, however, that announcement was premature, for the choice of deputy should have been the prerogative of the incoming Prime Minister, in this case Abdullah.

That fired the debates in the Umno political circle. Why should the choice of Abdullah's deputy be limited to Najib? Why not Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin? Or Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib?

Muhammad is the least likely, especially when he is not a Member of Parliament. Yes, he could be appointed as a senator but wouldn't that make the whole nation wonder as to what was wrong with the other two "readily available" Umno vice presidents?

On that score, Muhyiddin, argue his supporters, should be given equal consideration even though Najib is the more "senior" vice president because he has won the most votes for the post twice running.

They further argue that the Umno convention for selecting the deputy prime minister is not based on who is the most senior Umno vice-president.

For precedent, they point to Dr Mahathir himself, chosen to be Tun Hussein Onn's deputy when he was not the most senior vice president.

Supporters of Najib counter this by saying that the fact Dr Mahathir himself publicly expressed his choice, made Najib the right choice. Since Umno has been fulsome in its praise for Dr Mahathir's wisdom and excellent leadership, then logically, his "last wish" and judgement should be respected.

Quid pro quo, they say. Najib accepted Dr Mahathir's decision to pick Abdullah as his deputy in 1998, even though he was the more senior vice president.

In short, they believe that Najib's pre-paredness to toe the party line and continue to work for the nation then earned him the right not to be overlooked the next time around.

A weighty matter for Abdullah, indeed.

The next item needing Abdullah's attention is the Cabinet.

Given the fact that Dr Mahathir is also the First Finance Minister, his retirement means an important post falls vacant.

Abdullah could fill the vacancy immediately after he takes over as Prime Minister, perhaps promote Second Finance Minister Datuk Jamaluddin Jarjis.

Alternatively, he could fill the vacancy only after the general election, perhaps opting for a Cabinet reshuffle then.

Which way would he lean? That would depend on when he plans to hold the general election.

Abdullah could opt to hold it soon, meaning by December, and ride the ground swell of goodwill for Dr Mahathir and hope the citizenry will vote in favour of the Barisan Nasional as a fitting farewell gift.

But that depends on how soon the pro-tem Umno committees can function and internal bickering over appointments be settled.

Reportedly, the list of pro-tem committees is ready and due to be announced soon.

Considerations for a later election would be the need to stabilise the party after the changes in the Umno ranks, the selection of candidates of Abdullah's choice and the strengthening of his own position.

Another factor may be Dr Mahathir himself.

In the last election, the Opposition managed to whip up hatred against Dr Mahathir, securing many votes in the Malay-majority states.

Now that Dr Mahathir is no more in the picture - and the fact is sinking in among those who may have hated him - it may be to Abdullah's advantage not to rush the election.

He could then use his "non-confrontational" image to win back those who abandoned Umno because they could not accept Dr Mahathir. Abdullah would need time to woo these voters.

In short, much as Dr Mahathir is leaving behind a legacy which none may be able to emulate, it is not going to be smooth sailing for Abdullah and his successors.

But there are several things they can learn from Dr Mahathir.

He did not go round trying to show he was down to earth, but came across at times as arrogant and ruthless.

Neither did he pretend to be an intellectual, nor did anyone in his circle.

It is his pragmatic nature, bluntness and directness which command respect. The Spark-manshop jacket is an outer casing most don't notice.