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Only Umno can defeat Umno

AROUND this time last year, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad left the Umno general assembly in uproar and pandemonium, and the country in abject disbelief, by declaring his resignation with immediate effect. Thankfully, he was prevailed upon to postpone his decision. There is never an opportune moment for a leader of such long-established stature to step down; never a fit occasion for the party, the Government and the nation to break the addiction of relying on his sure hand in steering the ship of state. In October, Dr Mahathir will leave an Umno that has grown into the most triumphant democratic party in the developing world. He will also leave a considerable vacuum. He could, if the party fails to make up for his departure, also bequeath an Umno that is burdened by the downside of its enormous successes, an Umno that is at serious risk of becoming fat, lazy and covetous.

Dr Mahathir's opening address at the 54th assembly was no less urgent, no less admonitory, for being his last. His message was all too familiar: that the laurels upon which the party presumes to rest cannot, and must never, be taken for granted. The struggle for independence, for which Umno was founded and on which it must continue to depend for the breath of life, has not been completely won, and perhaps never will be. National sovereignty is being progressively endangered by Western neo-colonialism, and the captivation of hearts and minds by religious extremism in desperate reaction. This is the reality that Dr Mahathir warned most stridently of: the Western or "European" imperial tendency, once a matter of persuasive ideology and the securing of markets and profit by economic muscle, is being pushed forward by the threat, and use, of military force and weapons of mass destruction. Muslim countries, by deliberate targeting and by their own weaknesses, are first in the line of fire. Along with its autonomy will go the country's will as well as its resources to protect the interests of its people. Malaysia and Umno, if allowed to dissolve in disunity, will be held hostage to the globalisation of the mighty.

Ironically, the potential for disunity has been increased by rapid development and social progress. Stable government and the relentless creation of wealth have caused a divergence between abilities and expectations. Inebriated by the Western-imposed notion of democracy as an end in itself, some Malaysians are turning this discrepancy into heedless discontent. Dr Mahathir spoke against those who wantonly demand First World facilities at Third World prices; against the flotsam of a cosseted community who desire the Malaysian dream without having to work hard to pay for it. A more pernicious perversion exists in Islam, whose lofty ideals have been undermined by sectarian politics. Dr Mahathir reiterated that it has now become the Government's responsibility, as far as possible, to enclose the ummah within the true faith, by ensuring that Islamic education in public schools is not subverted by the deviationist ustaz and ustazah and their accomplices.

Cracks in the cohesion of the Malays will wobble the delicate balancing act that is multi-racial, multi-religious Malaysia. National integration has become paramount. Against the forces of division, external and internal, there is only the bastion of Umno, at the head of a coalition government of consensus and consent. The Prime Minister reserved his deepest passion for his party, the lynchpin of the nation, the final arbiter of its ongoing success or impending failure. No other political

movement comes close to it, in its principles, its historical record, its spirit, its machinery and organisation, and, most of all, in its promise. Dr Mahathir aimed his cautionary speech at the ultimate irony: that Umno's success has made it its own worst enemy. "The Opposition is not strong," he said. "They cannot defeat Umno. But Umno can defeat Umno." After October, it will be the task of Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi to weld the party together to elude this fate. We trust that he will have the political will to do what needs to be done to preserve and enhance the party's, the Government's and the nation's resounding achievements.