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Dr M fully deserves all the accolades that came his way

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LAST year, when Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad dropped the bomb-shell that he was quitting at the closing of that Umno general assembly, tears flowed freely.

They were tears of shock, disbelief and a sense of sudden loss.

Party leaders, members and supporters were sobbing uncontrollably.

On Thursday, when Dr Mahathir came to the end of his presidential address, the part when he thanked Umno members for their support and apologised for anything wrong he might have done, tears again trick-led.

They were not tears of disbelief accompanied by shock.

The best word to describe such tears has to be in Bahasa Melayu - sayu - which in English means probably poignant or maybe even sadness.

Here was a man, most powerful in the country for the last two decades, who had shed tears at several Umno assemblies, especially in the last few years.

It comes with age, as many had said that the older one gets, the more sensitive one becomes.

His critics may describe them as crocodile tears. But to those who believe in him, every tear was one too many to be shed, especially for party members and leaders who had been selfish and merely riding the party for self gain.

Again, one may argue that other leaders, if they had taken the helm instead of Dr Mahathir, would have invoked such strong sentiments. But it was he who had been holding the mantle and not the others.

It is truly sad that prior to 1998, when he had the fallout with his then deputy Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, Dr Mahathir was held on a pedestal.

Following that, much as Umno members may publicly declare their support and love for him, others outside the political circle who, deep inside them truly respect and regard the man highly, dared not share their thoughts with their friends openly, unless they knew that they were like-minded.

Many feared being labelled a Mahathir apologist, or an apple polisher.

No doubt, the man has his faults and they are, no doubt, numerous.

At the same time, he has made his contributions, and they are equally numerous.

But for local journalists who had the opportunity to cover him over the years, they would, in private conversations, admit that Dr Mahathir is a very approachable leader.

He has been known to tell off journalists for asking questions he did not like and he had never pretended that his tolerance for them is exceptionally high.

Neither is Dr Mahathir known to be able to crack good jokes but on good days he had tried.

But for those who had covered his Press conferences, most would readily admit that he is an "easy" subject as his answers were forthright, his explanations clear and concise and he never minced his words on matters he feels strongly about.

He is also lucky, or had been smart enough to choose the right kind of press secretaries and security aides who are without airs or arrogant unlike those working for some other leaders.

Now, for all his deeds and faults, the man is set to leave.

That is the main thing about this Umno general assembly.

Dr Mahathir is telling Umno, and the rest of the citizens, that he is leaving.

He is also telling them that he has tried to provide the leadership which he hoped had improved the nation. And he is also wishing them good luck and all the best as he has done his bit.

Among those who distrust and dis-like him, they will not believe that he is leaving until the day comes.

For those who love and trust him, they have come to terms that come October, Dr Mahathir, who had been their prime minister and Umno president for more than two decades, is stepping down, and that is final.

Some who hold him in high regard are still hoping that somehow or other, he would change his mind or something unexpected would occur which will force him to stay.

But such thoughts are wishful thinking.

He has gone too far in wanting to step down and that statement of intent is not confined within Malaysia but had been conveyed to his counterparts abroad.

Dr Mahathir knows only too well that if he changes his mind, his credibility will be gone and that is something that not only he can't afford to do as it will not only affect himself but those who had stood by him through the years.

But for the believers, man can only plan their destiny but Providence decides.

That, however, is something which no amount of debate can resolve.

Umno members, especially those who take the party seriously and not as a platform to elevate their standing or wealth, are psyching themselves for the post-Dr Mahathir era.

For these people, if they rally around successor Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, it is because they trust Dr Mahathir to have made the right choice.

But for the opportunists, the departure of Dr Mahathir means they will now have to figure out what kind of political gain they may get out of it.

It is this kind of people, if accepted by any of the leaders into their confidence, who may very well be the cause of their downfall.

Umno's history had shown how numerous leaders with potential suffered due to their letting such opportunists dictate the direction of their political destiny.

But that is for leaders, in the post-Dr Mahathir era, to figure out.

At the same time, looking at the makcik and kakak who were trying to hold back their tears as they watched Dr Mahathir try to hold back his, it is obvious they were not attempting to apple polish him.

The tears they shed will not give them anything as Dr Mahathir probably does not even know them.

If it was for returns, then such tears should be reserved for those succeeding him and not for someone who is on his way out.

But the tears will definitely be a farewell gift that Dr Mahathir should cherish as they came unsolicited.

And he deserves them, regardless of what his detractors may say.