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Time to take their leave?

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PRIOR to Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's retirement, Pas had accused him of merely play-acting about his plans to step down.

Now that Dr Mahathir had proven that he meant what he said, Pas' spiritual adviser Datuk Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat claimed that it was the accusations which "forced" Dr Mahathir to make good his word.

The Kelantan Menteri Besar claimed that Pas had intentionally accused Dr Mahathir of play-acting to ensure that he remained true to his word about stepping down as Prime Minister.

"It is a tactic on our part to force him to live up to his word about retiring," said Nik Aziz.

Nik Aziz' remarks came about a week after he led the Pas-dominated Kelantan Legislative Assembly to pass a motion of thanks to Dr Mahathir for his contributions to the nation and the State.

Such contradictions, tactical as it may be in politics, is not something which reflects goodwill or ethics which should be emulated by the rest of the apolitical citizenry.

The remarks by Nik Aziz incensed many from the Barisan Nasional and Umno who felt that what he had said was against the basic tenets of Islam which he proclaims to uphold and promote.

"Even if religious principles are being put aside for the sake of political ends, there is so much contradiction in what Pas and Nik Aziz had all this while portrayed about Dr Mahathir.

"After the 1999 general election, they claim that much of their good showing was due to the hatred of the people for Dr Mahathir, singled out by Pas and other opposition parties as their target of hatred and character assassination.

"Now, the way Nik Aziz is saying things, it is as if they want Dr Mahathir out so badly so as to give them a better chance in the next general election," said a young professional in an e-mail.

She said what made it more nauseating is that, while Dr Mahathir, despite enjoying much popularity among a cross section of the Malaysian society, was prepared to step down, his critics, Nik Aziz included, do not seem to realise that they are only popular within their own group of supporters.

"Nik Aziz and the likes of him should look into the mirror and realise that they too have been holding on to power (as a Menteri Besar for three terms) and had outlived their usefulness. Is he planning to retire only after he becomes the Prime Minister?" she asked.

While such outbursts, especially among those who may love Dr Mahathir, are only expected, what is of the essence is that politicians outliving their usefulness may end up becoming excess baggage to their parties.

Nik Aziz may not belong to that category as yet, given the fact that even some Umno leaders from Kelantan believe that one of the stumbling blocks to their efforts to penetrate the State which had been under Pas rule for the past three terms is the Pas leader.

Supporters of other political parties, including those in the BN, had also, in back-handed manner, ignored the call by Dr Mahathir that veteran leaders should step down and give way to new faces.

Take, Gerakan, for example. Its long-serving president, Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik, was one of the BN component party leaders who were asked if he would emulate Dr Mahathir's move.

While he claimed that he was ready to do so, the party members felt otherwise and made it clear by passing a resolution stating that they wanted Dr Lim to continue leading them.

"It is always easy for leaders to claim that they want to leave, but were stopped by party members. Dr Mahathir could have also used similar reasons as even until the eve of his retirement, there were still pleas for him to stay and that was not confined to Umno members but ordinary citizens," said an observer.

But Gerakan's Dr Lim is not the only long-serving leader among the BN component parties. MIC president Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu had been holding the post for two dozen years. Then there is the Chief Minister of Sarawak Tan Sri Abdul Taib Mahmud of Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu and Negri Sembilan Menteri Besar Tan Sri Isa Abdul Samad.

BN secretary-general Tan Sri Mohamed Rahmat had consistently reminded Umno and BN leaders that they should not attempt to "stretch" their presence.

He had always used the example of Tan Sri Wan Mokhtar Ahmad who was Terengganu Menteri Besar for more than two decades and was shown the exit when he failed to defend the State in the 1999 general election.

Other examples include the crisis besieging Sarawak National Party (SNAP) whose president, Datuk Amar James Wong Kim Min who is almost synonymous with the party, had to face internal rebellion leading to the party splitup.

Samy Vellu has taken a swipe at journalists, in particular those from Malaysian Nanban, a Tamil newspaper which had openly urged him to step down.

He pointed out that these scribes were questioning the achievements of MIC leaders without knowing what these leaders had done for the Indian community.

Today, a gathering of some 12,000 MIC members, the largest for the Indian community under one roof, is expected to give endorsement for Samy Vellu to continue leading the party which he has been doing since 1979.

Such endorsement only makes the whole exercise of calling for veteran politicians to step down, including that from Dr Mahathir, sound hollow.

The reason Dr Mahathir made the call is obvious - he did not want voters to get tired of the same faces, causing them to turn their back on BN.

Herein lies the problems faced by the BN in dealing with inter-component issues.

Each component party is bound by convention not to interfere in the internal affairs of their partners.

In short, party members determine who they want as their leaders.

However, when the coalition enters the election, they venture into it collectively, meaning that Umno members are expected in seats where there is no Umno candidate contesting, to vote for the candidate from other BN components.

The same applies to the MCA, MIC and other partners in which members will vote and support any BN candidate even if they are not from the party they belong to.

That has always been the underlying principle for BN's co-existence. It has worked since the BN was the Alliance, founded way before Independence.

However, it has now become quite unwieldy, apart from the fact that there are 14 components representing different ethnic groups, meaning differing priorities and aspirations; the grouping also had to "carry" some component leaders and candidates despite realising that they were excess baggage to the coalition.

But none can point fingers at the other as each are, rightly or wrongly,

inter-dependent in certain constituencies where the supporters from a partner party may just provide the edge for victory.

Due to this, component parties were left to their own devices in terms of leadership and direction even though at times, at the expense of the partners.

Usually, each component party has its own device for removing leaders who are inconsequential or had outlived their usefulness.

But some leaders are having a firm grip on the party, so much so that removing them through the party electoral process, is almost impossible.

Then, the process of eliminating these leaders is left to the voters. However, due to the BN concept in which component partners will support each other, these leaders continue to win in the polls, not so much because of their popularity, but due to the collective support of their component partners and the affection the citizenry has for the coalition.

These factors do not seem to disturb such leaders though they are aware that their grip on the constituencies has little to do with their popularity.

With that, the cycle continues for years, and when the voters finally feel they have had enough, the BN suffers a major setback, as in the case of Terengganu.

By then, it is too late to reflect on the political saying that a jackass can kick a barn door down, but it takes a carpenter to build one.