

01/11/2003

End to an era filled with pride and sense of worth

Shamsul Akmar

IT was a good day to retire. After all, it was a Friday and during the Ramadan. To most Malays, the day and month are both blessed.

No doubt, reading some of the views on the Internet news providers, there are those who seemed glad to see the back of Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

The outpouring of tributes and accolades from all walks of Malaysian life, even from foreigners, makes these detractors sound like voices in the wilderness.

It is only expected of the man who had helmed the nation for 22 years that he would have won more than a fair share of admirers as well as critics.

A nice touch to the runup to Dr Mahathir's retirement yesterday was the Kelantan Legislative Assembly's unanimous decision to pass a resolution to thank him for his co-operation with the State and his contributions to the nation.

Tabling the motion was Menteri Besar Datuk Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat, the Pas' murshidul aam or spiritual adviser.

While Nik Aziz and the Kelantan assembly join the long list of others who had been paying tributes to Dr Mahathir, the fact that it came from Nik Aziz and Pas-dominated assembly makes it more than a trifle special.

To most, it reflected the feel Nik Aziz has for the political pulse, meaning he is aware that, all in all, most Malaysians appreciated what Dr Mahathir had done for the country as well as for Kelantan.

It was a good gesture from Nik Aziz as it helps, in many ways, to send a message to party members to realise that differences on the political front should not blind them to the achievements and successes of those on the opposing side.

However, that gesture was yesterday negated by some Kelantan Pas Youth members who, accompanied by some Parti Keadilan Nasional members, lodged a police report against Dr Mahathir for crimes allegedly committed during his tenure.

Much as such an act may leave a bad aftertaste, it is also a reflection of what Dr Mahathir's legacy is all about - that until his very last day in office, there are still those who are not satisfied with all the cursings and swearings they had heaped upon him while he was Prime Minister; even after he had proven most of his critics wrong.

But such antics are not expected to make much of a difference as, generally, the nation had accepted that Dr Mahathir had done well for Malaysia and that he deserves all the tributes, and that the brickbats should have been confined to while he was still in office, and not when he had retired.

Furthermore, some of his ardent critics are not even a fraction of the man he is.

Forget about his position and power. Judging him by just his work ethic, dedication, discipline and his hunger for knowledge, his detractors may not even come close to his shadow.

And regardless that his retirement was long anticipated - given the fact that the deadline to step down was announced some 18 months ago - many Malaysians who loved him, still felt a sense of loss.

There are those who felt that Dr Mahathir deserves his retirement, which is long overdue.

Then there are those who are still pleading that he continue, believing that he has at least a few more good years to contribute to the nation.

But no one should take away Dr Mahathir's sense of timing.

Dr Mahathir was well aware that he had managed to take the nation out of the woods - both on the economic and political fronts.

There is nothing to guarantee that if he stays, things will continue to look up for him - there is always a possibility that some crisis may crop up and time may be against him next time around.

It is probably difficult for many, especially those who are 40 and below, to wake up today to realise that the Prime Minister is no more Dr Mahathir.

It is indeed an end to an era - turbulent at times, but filled with much injection of pride and a sense of worth.

That is probably the best gift that Dr Mahathir gave the nation - from a nation which used to look up to the West to one which believed that the West should pay attention to it.

Malaysians who have travelled the world during Dr Mahathir's time will admit that introducing themselves as Malaysians is no more a matter of worrying about whether the foreigners know where the country is.

It is more a matter of expecting to be treated equally, as citizens from other nations are.

Many Malaysians discovered in their sojourns abroad, especially to Muslim nations or Third World countries, that the minute they introduced themselves as Malaysians, the first reaction would be: "Oh, Dr Mahathir... Malaysia is a good country."

Though his detractors may argue otherwise, Dr Mahathir has become synonymous with the success and the achievements of Malaysia.

Against such a backdrop, it is not surprising that his retirement will make many a Malaysian feel the sense of loss.

The only saving grace is that his retirement was expected and did not come as a shock.

It would, no doubt, have been more of a shock if Dr Mahathir had stuck to his decision when he made the surprise announcement about wanting to step down during the Umno general assembly last year.

However, he relented to pleadings and agreed to stay on and participate in the transition period before passing on the mantle to Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

Yesterday, the transition was completed.

Some said Dr Mahathir looked sombre during the swearing-in ceremony of Abdullah at the Istana Negara. However, he looked his usual self when he was with Abdullah at the Prime Minister's office in Putrajaya later.

He even managed to offer the seat he usually occupied to Abdullah, signalling his acknowledgement that the seat is for the Prime Minister, which he is no more.

Today, Dr Mahathir is a former Prime Minister of Malaysia and many will have to get used to that fact.

Yesterday was a good day for Dr Mahathir to step down. Then again, Dr Mahathir had, during his tenure, shown that any day would have been just as good for him.