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Farewell to an exemplary leader

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SIX days from today, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, the Prime Minister of Malaysia, will step down from the most powerful office in government.

The tradition of peaceful, gentlemanly and honourable transfer of power is something which the nation must cherish and cultivate in the political culture and in other fields of leadership.

Every good leader is a role model for future leaders.

Students and the general public can learn a lot about themselves by studying and understanding the decision-making processes of leaders they admire.

Whatever the criticisms against Dr Mahathir - the man and the politician - the following instances of his leadership provide valuable insights for us to reflect.

In the mid-1960s when Dr Mahathir spoke to students at the University of Malaya (then the only university in the country) about national development and about rights and privileges of the Bumiputeras and the Malays, he articulated views pertaining to the social contract and the need for non-Malays, particularly the Chinese, to understand and accept that in the Nusantara they are surrounded by a sea of Malays and Bumiputeras.

These ideas were repeated when he gave a similar talk at the National University of Singapore where the student population was predominantly Chinese.

Over the years, Dr Mahathir has displayed consistency of logic, argument and unequivocal position regarding First Principle and controversial issues.

When he was out of Umno and back in medical practice in Kedah, almost everyday, at the same time, he drove his Pontiac from Anak Bukit to Alor Star.

Later, when he held the office of Prime Minister, he would be in his office upon his return from abroad.

He is the embodiment of punctuality and diligence. For him, whatever the personal circumstances, work must go on.

His book, *The Malay Dilemma*, was considered controversial. He was not apologetic for what he wrote although he was labelled a Malay ultra in the early days.

Through the years, he has come to be accepted, respected, loved and trusted by non-Malays.

He continues to be straightforward and blunt in expressing his views which are reflections of his understanding of world affairs, not in terms of black and white realities, but in terms of complex relationships.

His writings foster critical, creative, logical and hypothetical thinking on significant issues affecting an ethnic group, the nation, the region and the international arena.

While the citizenry sees images of the Prime Minister talking and delivering official addresses at national and international conferences, he is actually a good listener.

He listens to guests, laymen, public officers, business leaders and professionals.

He, however, makes his own decisions, often based on comprehensive inner deliberations framed within values for the general good of the community. To do so, one has to have integrity of intellectual character and abide by

the principles of consistency, coherence and fairness.

Equally important, Dr Mahathir is a lifelong learner.

When the Vice President of America insulted Dr Mahathir and the nation during the Apec Summit in 1998, he remained cool and played the refined host till the end.

Such an attitude reflects emotional and adversity intelligence and the strength to stand alone proudly to do the right thing based on the best traditions of indigenous culture.

It is an example to be emulated not just by diplomats but by every citizen aspiring for finesse and integrity of character.

Throughout his political leadership he has cried publicly on many occasions, reaffirming that leaders can cry too.

It should not be seen as a weakness but as an act of endearment.

When the Malaysian Car Project was launched, he was asked the economic rationale for the initiative. He said it had nothing to do with his economic theories but with political will.

It was not merely the symbolic demonstration of national pride but also about developing technological and economic competencies. Great achievements begin with the mastery of basic skills.

Understanding the need for building fitness for the future, he initiated and was supportive of the smallest grassroots projects - not just the so-called mega projects including the network of highways, Multimedia Super Corridor, Putrajaya and Cyberjaya and the Petronas Twin Towers.

There is profound understanding of the art and science of muddling through initiatives mindful of the limits of growth while stretching the possibilities of development.

The confidence of the citizenry is enhanced by the pursuit of such principles as leadership by example, articulation of universal Islamic values, the virtue of diligence, the imagination of Malaysia Boleh and the passion for articulating alternative views particularly from perspectives of national interests.

He knows that efforts such as reaching the Himalayas; conducting scientific expeditions to Antarctica; swimming across the English Channel; hosting the Commonwealth Games and the meetings of the Non-Aligned Movement and the Organisation of the Islamic Conference are all part of building national resilience and fostering nationhood.

In the early years of his Prime Ministership, Dr Mahathir declared that among the joys of leadership are the opportunities of beautifying Kuala Lumpur, influencing the landscaping of the nation and promoting a culture of cleanliness, efficiency and excellence, instituting best practices and benchmarking.

He also promoted, sequentially, the focus on manipulative skills, do-it-yourself skills, living skills and design in the curriculum.

In the wider domains, he promoted the Look East Policy (towards Japan, Korea and Taiwan), then, Look Further East (towards South America) and thus departed from the traditional focus on the West and the Middle East.

He now enjoins Malaysians to acquire global skills and become world leaders in major fields.

Educational, political, economic and social ideas have merged in harmony.

National success is always about cumulative attainment and the contributions of many people.

National success, however, needs focus, political will, determination, commitment and exemplary leadership.

There is much yet to be elicited, understood and explored.

It is not easy to be a leader at any level.

The challenges of leadership are varied in scope, complexity, national

significance and impact. Leaders are often lonely.

Leaders who are principled make decisions they consider are necessary and right, come what may.

Such leaders do not play to the gallery by making token or dramatic gestures to please the crowd.

The measure of national leaders or any leader is always multifaceted.

In writing about any political figure, there is the double jeopardy of criticism and unhappiness by both detractors and ardent supporters.

There is, therefore, a need on the part of writers to uphold professional and personal integrity in their analyses.

Do remember that no person is perfect and there is ordinariness in the very best among us.

There is a need to understand that some people contribute more effectively and broadly than others.

The risk of writing biographies and autobiographies is that such works are always embedded with different kinds of biases and interpretations.

During the last year or so, particularly after the announcement of Dr Mahathir's retirement, there have been a series of seminars and meetings aimed towards compiling the works, thoughts and contributions of the Prime Minister.

Such initiatives may be a part of the emerging broader culture of recording the contributions of the ordinary and extraordinary Malaysians at national and local levels.

We bid him farewell and record our gratitude for his contributions to the nation.

We congratulate the Prime Minister-designate and believe that the next phase of nationhood will create another threshold of development with significant contributions.

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