

16/11/2003

Guessing game to the fore as we await appointment of Deputy PM

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SPECULATION is rife as to the intentions of the new Prime Minister vis-a-vis his Cabinet. For the most part, objectivity is never a concern as each individual is approaching the subject squarely from a selfish perspective.

For example, bankers and business people are concerned with who shall fill the posts of economic ministers.

Those who go by the principle of who-you-know and not what-you-know as the key to success, are backing, by sheer force of self-interest, their friendly potential candidate.

Others who do not know any particular prospect are looking at someone who will best serve the interests of the business community. This opinion is more in concert with the common good, as the outcome will benefit the nation and not just a handful of waiting cronies.

And then there are those who are betting the odds on who shall be the Deputy Prime Minister. This debate is by far the most interesting because former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad had proposed a possible candidate - Defence Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak.

Will he or will he not be appointed the deputy has become a cause for much discussion.

The Prime Minister has, however, resisted making any announcement just yet. This, however, has not stopped the nation from speculating, which is an undeniable right of people in a country where the freedom of expression is enshrined in the Federal Constitution.

Those who say he will, go by the argument that Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi will show deference to the man who anointed him successor by choice and not through the party ballot box. To this camp goes the notion that he owes Dr Mahathir and not ignoring his advice is a simple demonstration of respect.

But the former Prime Minister has himself relented, leaving that decision entirely on the incumbent, thus respecting the latter's prerogative. The incumbent, for his part, has said that he will appoint a deputy in good time.

As he has admitted, the burden of office - what with chairing the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) - will force his hand. What begs an answer is, who? Who is going to be appointed the deputy?

Plato, the ancient Greek philosopher, arguably the father of the Enlightenment, in his Republic, stipulated several criteria for leadership. All of them are defined by one end - that of achieving the common good. Towards this end, a leader must, therefore, possess "a wise and good nature".

Plato theorises on the ideal of cultivating a class of so-called "guardians of society, educated for leadership", to lead the nation as philosopher kings, so to speak.

Though often beyond our accomplishment, ideals are useful as benchmarks of aspirations and although perfection may not be possible, the objective, in this respect, must surely fall somewhere near to it.

And if Umno's oligarchic tradition set by Dr Mahathir - of appointees rising unopposed to the highest elected office of the land - to become a received convention, then the position of Deputy Prime Minister is of paramount importance to the country.

The leader-in-waiting must possess the reputation that is closest to

that painted by Plato.

For, is not the attainment of good the end to which life is purposed? Or is modern man no longer appreciative of wisdom and temperance, beguiled as he is with a multitude of material distractions?

Of no less importance, too, is the moral and intellectual fibre of those who will sit in the Cabinet. As leaders, they are also subject to Plato's ideals.

Although we cannot farm the professional politician, we can at least demand of them certain moral and intellectual credentials.

After all, can an office boy be expected to have the same calibre of leadership as the university professor, for example?

There is no doubting that the principles of democracy will allow the office boy to offer himself to the people for the highest office in the land, but the people should have the wisdom to exercise a measure of discretion.

For now, the people have spoken and the parliamentarians chosen. The Prime Minister's choice is, to a certain extent, thus, made. While he has inherited a Cabinet, he is under no obligation to keep them all.

Given the prevailing "changing of the guard" mood, he may be thinking of nurturing some new faces to ensure continuity. But, the deputy premiership will surely not go to an inexperienced, unfamiliar face because the leader-in-waiting is the understudy who will take over when the need arises.

Although he or she must be supportive and not attempt to steal the thunder from the Prime Minister, he or she is expected to step into the shoes of the Prime Minister unhesitatingly when the occasion dictates.

Hence the need for an appointment of a deputy sooner, rather than later, so that the succession is made clear from the very outset.

Under the prevailing circumstances, without a clear Umno decision on whether there will be an acting-deputy president, the existing Barisan Nasional pecking order comes into play should anything untoward happen. Or can the nation expect the Umno vice-president with the highest votes to step automatically into the shoes temporarily, or otherwise, vacated?