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It is a truly unique legacy

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I OUGHT to keep the record straight for posterity. How did Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad manage to attain the premiership and stay for so long, despite all odds, numerous plots and rumours of them against him?

I was the lone witness when the three vice-presidents of Umno - Ghafar Baba (now Tun), Tan Sri Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, and Dr Mahathir (I believe a Tun on Friday; congratulations on being conferred the senior order bestowed on Tun Razak, the Seri Mahkota Negara) met one evening in early March 1976 at Tengku Razaleigh's penthouse in Bank Bumiputra, Jalan Melaka (now the Tas building).

I had always been their friend, besides being Tun Razak's political adviser and a member of the Umno Supreme Council. I had campaigned hard for them (throwing Tun Razak's name in for good measure; of course, with his permission) to defeat five other candidates for the vice-presidencies of Umno at the June 21, 1975 Umno supreme council election.

Tun Razak was pleased with the results because he did not want others to win, especially Datuk Harun Idris, who came in fourth with 427 votes and Tan Sri Syed Jafar Albar, who was fifth with 374. The other one he absolutely did not want was Tan Sri Ghazali Shafie, but there was no worry about him for he was a non-starter, polling only 106 votes out of 1,080. Dr Mahathir had won 474 votes.

Datuk Hussein Onn, the Deputy Prime Minister who suddenly became PM upon Tun Razak's unexpected death on Feb 14, 1976, wanted the hugely unpopular Ghazali, Home Minister and last of the seven candidates for vice-president, to be his deputy. One or two foreign leaders dropped by in Kuala Lumpur to boost Ghazali's chances. One was Ali Murtopo, Suharto's intelligence chief, a crony of Ghazali's and one of the Indonesians who negotiated the end of the Konfrontasi with Malaysia.

The three vice-presidents gave Hussein an emphatic "no", actually an ultimatum that either one of them be elevated or none would serve in Hussein's Cabinet. The shocked Hussein, though very reluctantly, chose Dr Mahathir, the only good decision he ever made as Prime Minister, for which I will always thank him.

Dr Mahathir, Ghafar and Tengku Razaleigh reinforced the tradition that only elected vice-presidents of Umno would be potential prime ministers for as long as Umno rules Malaysia. Dr Mahathir was made a king, not born one. If one is not born a king and would like to be one, then he should heed the advice Dr Mahathir gave while he was Education Minister in 1975, a year before he was made deputy king: "No shortcut to the top."

Dr Mahathir became a minister only after having been in the party for 28 years, was expelled and readmitted and then spent 29 years in the Cabinet, the last 22 at its head.

Did Tun Razak want him to be his eventual successor? Yes. He confided to me the names of three probable successors and Dr Mahathir topped the list. And when Hussein asked me confidentially whom Tun Razak would have made his deputy if Hussein had died instead of him, I said Tun Razak's first choice would have been Dr Mahathir.

Ramadan is a time of remembrance, gratitude and well-being sharpened by hunger and self-denial. Throughout Dr Mahathir's premiership, each year has brought a little more to the table at buka puasa (iftar in Arabic), a little more to be thankful for. Over the span of his 22 years, it has amounted to quite a feast. Equivalently, the menu of honours one can call

on to commemorate him resembles a banquet.

Some will take a small tidbit, such as Raewynn and Raenette Tan who e-mailed me on Monday: "We were not even born when Dr Mahathir became Prime Minister, but he brought all Malaysians together when, soon after, he synchronised the times of West and East Malaysia." And so it goes: He has touched the hearts of so many people that his imminent retirement has evoked platitudes as well as poetry.

But for me, Ramadan intrudes. In his last week in office, the words of eloquent praise I have kept dammed in my head for many months are tugged down by the growlings of an empty stomach.

I have no doubt that that is the way he prefers it. If there is anything that conjoins Dr Mahathir's friends and foes in honest salutation, it is in their admission that they will miss him. There won't be any big send-offs, no glittering valediction to throw what comes after in the shade.

By the grace of Allah, this fasting month has provided a spiritual dimension to the culmination of, I dare say, the smoothest leadership transition in the country's history.

Quite apart from the humility demanded of Holy Ramadan, an untroubled change at the top must never be taken for granted. A lot of history has been made and unmade, and wars fought, over succession issues. This is why departure is always a quandary.

Leaders can't go while they are too far ahead nor when they are too far behind. So they often leave it to fate, to Hamlet's slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.

Like comedy, political decisions are a matter of timing. But it is hard to judge the moment to end the show, even harder when it has been successful. Dr Mahathir had been at a loss too, deciding in June last year to let the curtains fall as they may. He was persuaded to stay on and preside over a most unruffled transfer of power to Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

The handover this Friday will be the last of Dr Mahathir's many bequests to Malaysia, a true parting gift after a long run of able leadership. It is not enough for a leader merely to anoint an heir. He must leave a realm worthy of his life and work.

People, as opposed to historians, will remember him most vividly by the last thing he did. Among many other endowments, Dr Mahathir will leave an economy expected to grow by close to five per cent this year, with the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis well behind it.

The Prime Minister's great service to the country in the last phase of his tenure was not just in lifting the economy out of disaster but in how he did it. He had staked a lot of political capital on the wager that this nation of ours possessed the beans and the mettle to act independently in its own best interests.

It brought him into loggerheads with many, including some in the Cabinet, who had advocated the International Monetary Fund's austerity programme. The Cabinet was persuaded to back him after three lengthy meetings.

To someone who embodies the pride of his country in his own person, being told by an outsider what was good for Malaysia at a time of need was, and always will be, anathema. Dr Mahathir of course won the bet.

He stopped the free fall of the ringgit by pegging it to the US dollar and imposed controls to keep capital from fleeing the country. The IMF prescribed for the economy to hit rock bottom before it could be set for growth again. Not surprisingly, in Thailand and Indonesia, IMF-imposed policies caused untold hardship and brought down governments. Perhaps a change to a more amenable leadership was the hidden aim of the IMF in Malaysia.

Last month, IMF chief Horst Koehler conceded during a visit to Kuala Lumpur that Dr Mahathir had been right. "With hindsight, we have to recognise the good performance of the economy. Mahathir was right," he said. Against this succinct validation of Dr Mahathir's rescue of the country, all other effusive tributes pale.

Those who know him well enough to joke about it would agree that the epitaph of his extended leadership can be found in the chorus of Frank Sinatra's *My Way*, which he occasionally sings at parties to the great amusement of the guests. The Prime Minister may be known for his protean pragmatism, but underneath it is an inflexible principle: never compromise your independence; never let anything get in the way of your wisdom to act for your own betterment.

To get this across, he was prepared to be "nasty". He has berated the Europeans, Americans, Muslims and, perhaps most of all, the Malays for still banking on the depleted currency of traditional modes of thought.

Dr Mahathir spent the last month putting the finishing touches to what the advertising industry would call Malaysia's positioning in a crowded world where small countries are left at a persistent disadvantage. That position depends on how we leverage ourselves to punch above our weight. In 22 years, what he has created above all is a voice - he has turned Malaysia into a mouse that roared.

In Ramadan, when the light of Allah shines brightest, I prefer not to think of Dr Mahathir in terms of the stuff that will go into the history books. He will remain in our memory if we continue to care what he thinks of us.

He has taught us to rise above ourselves, to value friendship, sincerity and loyalty, to always do good and, while we're at it, to take no nonsense from those who presume to know better. No finer homage can be paid to a great leader than if he gives us pause to ask ourselves if we have measured up.

In politics, I have learnt that ability is secondary. Acceptability, loyalty and, of course, timing are crucial. Winning elections isn't primary because there is always the Senate to go to.

People continually ask me how strong Dr Mahathir is compared with Tengku Abdul Rahman Putra or Tun Razak. I always say, Dr Mahathir is as strong as his party, Cabinet, his informal advisers and inner circle allow him to be.

Dr Mahathir always sticks to his own doctrines of public service and national sovereignty. He will say what needs to be said and taking the evidence of his career as a whole, I think it seems likely that he will be willing to repeat what he believes in with equal force even on Judgement Day.