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It's leadership that matters

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PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's statement that while MCA may find it necessary to limit the term of office of its leaders, other parties may not see the need to do so (NST, Aug 10), adds an interesting chapter to the debate on whether or not there should be a cap to the period of time a leader remains in power.

In a democracy, a leader is elected to office by the people. The elected leader is then expected to serve to the best of his abilities until he feels the time is right to allow for new leadership to take-over.

Ideals, however, fall short of reality, and the idea of limiting the term of office is to guard against abuse of power by unscrupulous leaders.

Needless to say, the fear of such tyranny is valid. Many countries have limited the term of office of their elected leaders after having experienced years of oppressive and dictatorial rule by despots and tyrants.

Malaysia has been fortunate never to have experienced dictatorial rule since we attained independence. On the contrary, we have had successive capable leaders who have steered us from one achievement to another and to what we are today.

Before we even consider limiting their term of office, we must ask ourselves the objectives of such a move. Obviously, it would be a preemptive measure against oppressive rule. But it may also be an impediment to excellent leadership.

Perhaps it is not the number of years that matters. If an elected leader consistently shows himself capable of keeping the nation united and afloat through the worst of times, there is no reason to end his leadership merely on a technicality.

Maybe the focus should not be on a cap on the term of office, but rather on strengthening mechanisms to ensure a higher degree of accountability of elected leaders.

Ultimately, the best safeguard lies not in any rule that limits powers of elected leaders, but in democracy itself. The burden falls on the people to pick leaders who are willing to make sacrifices, leaders who place the needs of the people above their own and have the intelligence, courage and integrity needed to carry the mantle of leadership. If the people choose wisely, they may well find themselves wishing that leaders remain in office as long as is humanly possible.

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