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Limit tenure of PMs, MBs to two five-year terms

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DIA Kena Pecat (He was sacked) is the most terrible thing that could happen to anybody in our society, be he a factory worker, civil servant or company director. Inevitably, their entire future is doomed because sacking is associated with any number of negative attributes of a person.

On the other hand, resignation is regarded as a statement of principle of an independent-minded individual. Likewise, compulsory retirement on reaching the prescribed age limit is acknowledged as recognition for a job well done.

Politicians, however, are in a different category. Retirement is not in their vocabulary. Like the housewife, their work is never done. When faced with the prospect of dismissal, they tender their resignation or join another political party.

Recently, US President Bush sacked his Secretary to the Treasury and Economic Adviser after only two years in office because of the failure of their financial and economic policies. In their resignation letters they thanked the President for giving them the opportunity to serve the nation!

Ferdinand Marcos (1917-1989) of the Philippines was a good and effective President during his first four-year term (1965-1969). He disarmed the private armies of politicians and cleaned up the Press. He was the first President of that country to be re-elected to a second term. He then decided to defy the country's Constitution by declaring martial law in 1972 and ruled as a dictator until he was overthrown in 1986 by a "People Power" revolt led by Corazon Aquino.

The Philippines was regarded as the most democratic country in all of South-east Asia until the Marcos intervention. Democracy has since reasserted itself and to safeguard democracy, the Constitution was amended to limit the tenure of the President to a single six-year term.

Sukarno (1902-1970) was the first President of Indonesia when that country was granted independence in 1945. His popularity waned as the country suffered increasing internal chaos and poverty. An abortive communist coup in 1965 led to student riots and a takeover by the army led by General Suharto.

Suharto was to rule the country for 32 years, admittedly being re-elected to successive five-year terms but even then his people found his regime oppressive and a popular revolt finally drove him out of office.

Jomo Kenyatta (1889-1978) was the leader of the Kenya African National Union (Kanu) and won his country's independence in 1963, becoming its first President in 1964 until his death in 1978. Kanu was in power continuously for 39 years until it was defeated in the just concluded general election. Kenyatta's successor was prohibited from standing for re-election by the Constitution and although Kanu's candidate for the election was Kenyatta's son, the people had had enough of Kanu.

China is experiencing a smooth transition of power for the first time with constitutional provisions prohibiting the re-election of the incumbents beyond two five-year terms. Under the French Constitution, the President is limited to two seven-year terms. And the US Constitution limits the President's tenure to two consecutive four-year terms.

It will be seen that only with constitutional safeguards can there be smooth transition of political power, to curb the lust for power of politicians, guarantee democracy and prevent dictatorships.

It must be placed on record, however, that in our formative years after

gaining Independence, there was a need for establishing a strong and stable Central Government to first create a nation out of 13 States with traditional parochial attitudes and at the same time accomplish socio-economic development in addition to nurturing a fledgling parliamentary democracy.

We have adopted the Westminster system of parliamentary democracy. So have Australia, Canada, India, New Zealand and Sri Lanka. In these countries including the UK, a two-party political system ensures the possibility of an alternative government after every general election. There is therefore no need to limit the tenure of a prime minister.

In Malaysia, the political scenario is not the same. We have had coalition governments all along but coalitions can be very fragile. Component parties suffer from spasms of the Team A and Team B Syndrome where impatient second-liners attempt to oust incumbents who they perceive to be overstaying their welcome. The solution is to provide a mechanism for holders of public office to retire gracefully and honourably, constitutionally, albeit compulsorily so to speak.

We have been extremely fortunate in having had the right Prime Minister at the right time to be what we are today, but we should not push our luck.

In view of the impending retirement of Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad as Prime Minister, the Constitution should be amended before the next general election to limit the tenure of the Prime Minister, the Menteri Besar and Chief Ministers of the States to two consecutive five-year terms to ensure our future stability, peace and prosperity.