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Sterling political legacy, harmony and unity within the coalition

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THERE is a famous photograph taken soon after Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad became Umno president, taking over the helm from Tun Hussein Onn.

Both leaders were photographed in a warm embrace, and that picture, some 22 years on, has come to symbolise the smooth transition of power.

With yesterday being the final appearance of Dr Mahathir in a party general assembly as president, many were in anticipation.

What will his legacy to Umno be, and how would Dr Mahathir bid his farewell to the party?

Yesterday was a historic moment for Umno. Dr Mahathir leaves behind a sterling political legacy.

The critics have been proven wrong. Few could have foreseen the transition of power from Dr Mahathir to his successor to be this smooth.

For a 57-year-old organisation with over three million members that is perhaps the only political party established in the colonial era to have led the fight for independence and still remains in power, history books will find Dr Mahathir a resounding success.

He has navigated the party through many trials and tribulations that had led to the downfall of many of his peers.

Dr Mahathir has had four deputy presidents: Tan Sri Musa Hitam, Tun Ghafar Baba, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, and Abdullah.

Anwar, the deputy president before Abdullah, was sacked in 1998.

Dr Mahathir has also come through unscathed after two attempts on his presidency - by Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah in 1987, and Anwar, who along with his followers, took to the streets after being removed from the party.

His political legacy as Umno president, will also, by extension, be remembered for his performance in helming the Barisan Nasional.

As BN chairman, the Umno president is responsible for maintaining the harmony and unity within the coalition, a trying responsibility for a nation where political power is shared by parties representing the various communities.

Following the deregistration of Umno in 1988, then MCA president Datuk Seri Ling Liong Sik took over temporarily as BN chairman while Umno got its house back in order.

The MCA again came to the assistance of the largest BN component in the 1999 general election.

Many observers pointed out MCA's contribution in getting strong support from Chinese voters - which, along with the solid support for the BN in Sabah and Sarawak - in part boosted the BN victory.

Following the polls, Dr Mahathir led efforts to close ranks in Umno and ensure a consolidation of support for Abdullah. This allowed Umno to "return the favour" to the party's close ally, from a position of strength.

Dr Mahathir was there along with Abdullah to help efforts to broker the peace deal in MCA which was facing internal problems.

Dr Mahathir's departure will be sorely missed. As a dominant factor in Malaysian politics, he is not only going to be missed by his party and the BN, but by opponents as well, especially the Opposition.

Dr Mahathir has, for so long, served as "enemy No 1" to Pas, which could never resist his ability to "give as good as he gets".

Plain speaking and not afraid to speak his mind, Dr Mahathir, even until this assembly, is the first to call a spade a spade, and his views on the

Opposition have not been glowing.

Dr Mahathir had also become a crutch to some Malays who have become dependent on the party he has helmed for so long for favours and privileges.

It seems that Dr Mahathir has even become a crutch for Pas. When all else fails, Pas is quick to blame him for all the "ills and troubles" facing the country, race and religion.

He directed what may be his most stinging parting shot at Pas yesterday, describing the leaders' misinterpretation of the religion which threatens to disunite the Bumiputeras.

If topics raised at the debates and the president's closing speech during the general assembly are to be considered a barometer of Umno's concerns, then Pas is at the centre of the Umno radar screen when it comes to the next general election.

Parti Keadilan Nasional, formed by Anwar's supporters, does not even register on the screen.

For the delegates at the Umno general assembly, the focus was on the twin dangers which Dr Mahathir has tirelessly warned them about - the dangers of infighting and the external threats facing the Bumiputeras and country.

And finally, the time came for him to say goodbye.

Dr Mahathir said Umno was now regaining its glory after the many hardships during which time he had tried his best to see the party through.

It is best that he now stepped aside, he said.

Abdullah, in his speech yesterday, said the tribute to Dr Mahathir is for many reasons, one of which is due to his being such an able "captain".

And when it came for his curtain call in this final assembly as party president, Dr Mahathir, after helming the party for 22 years, chose to say goodbye using a simple pantun.

One verse of it read:

Setiap permulaan ada akhirnya; Menjadi peringatan kepada hamba, Kuasa dan jawatan bukan segalanya, Berkhidmat kerana bangsa dan negara.

(Every beginning has an end

That is the reminder to me

Power and position is not everything

Service is for race and country.)

There were no tears, which many anticipated from a great Bumiputera leader, whose driving force has been a strong love and dedication for the community and country.

For delegates, the pantun signalled that the baton of leadership has been passed, much the same way which an embrace 22 years ago marked Dr Mahathir's ascent to the presidency of Umno.