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Politicians must know when to exit gracefully

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IT all began with the surprise restructuring of Kelantan Umno recently. Apart from the chairman, Datuk Mustapa Mohamed, a new set of younger leaders was appointed to the State Liaison Committee.

Soon thereafter, Pahang Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Adnan Yaakob announced that he and his exco were willing to make way for new blood at the next general election. Other Umno leaders followed suit.

These developments were in response to the suggestion by Umno President Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad that senior leaders of the party holding public office for a long time should resign before the next general election.

At the Federal Government level, the office of the deputy prime minister enables the holder to step into the office of the prime minister in the event the PM resigns or dies in office.

At the State level, however, there is no office of deputy menteri besar or deputy chief minister intended for succession in the event of a resignation or death of the MB or CM.

As recently as after the 1999 general election when Tan Sri Sanusi Junid resigned as the Menteri Besar of Kedah, there was no obvious successor and it took some time to appoint the present MB from a field of several contenders.

At State level, the chairman of the Umno State Liaison Committee does not automatically become the MB or CM as the Umno president becomes PM.

This is because the members of the state liaison committee are not necessarily members of the State Legislative Assembly nor are they elected by the State Umno but appointed by the Umno president.

Further, the State Umno does not elect the MB or CM. The choice of an Umno MB or CM is made by the Umno president.

This state of affairs was brought about by factionalism in Umno and the need to ensure effective control of the party at State-level in much the same way the management of a corporation or commercial company is essential.

And, as it should be, in the civil service, the military and the police, total control top-down.

A political party, however, consists of politicians, who may not accept leaders foisted on them or who may not agree with the views of the top leaders on all matters but are still loyal to the party cause.

Political leaders are not masters but accepted and acknowledged through a process of elections.

Tengku Abdul Rahman Putra used to grumble about a certain cabinet minister. I made the observation that as the PM he could dismiss the minister at any time. Tengku said: "Yes, but the minister has the full support of Umno in his State and if I were to dismiss him, I would lose the support of Umno in his State." Hence it is said that politicians sleep with strange bedfellows!

A top-down regime, while to a certain extent is necessary for party discipline, cultivates a patronage culture.

What becomes important is who you know and not whether you have grassroots support.

This was why the Congress Party of India under the patronage of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi lost power.

The fortunes of other political parties and its own past are not lost on

the MIC. Elections are held at branch, division, State and national levels.

Its 46,000 branch chairmen nominate and elect the party president.

Perhaps Umno should revert to its former practice of electing the leaders of the State Umno with the chairman becoming the candidate for MB or CM, and the deputy chairman, the candidate for deputy MB or deputy CM in States where Umno gains power.

The MB or CM should rightly be elected by the State Legislative Assembly.

The immediate objective of the restructuring exercise in Kelantan is to prepare the Barisan Nasional to recapture the State from Pas at the next general election.

Umno failed to regain Kelantan and lost Terengganu in the 1999 election because its leaders overstayed. Indeed in the 1959 election, Kelantan Umno members asked for a completely new set of candidates because Umno had made a mess of the State Government elected in 1955.

The incumbents naturally resisted and were renominated. Umno lost that election to PMIP in a protest vote against Umno.

A fully elected State Umno Committee will no doubt be a power to reckon with by the national leaders but it will also provide Umno with a strong power base.

More importantly, elected State Umno leaders will undergo a mindset change to perform on their own merit, to shoulder responsibility and cease to be tied to the apron strings of the party president.

Times have changed. Our politicians today are better educated and mature to give better expression to the practice of parliamentary democracy.