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The highest office beckons

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THE goal on which all politicians set their sights, I mean the final object of their ambition, is the premiership and, at the State level, either the post of Menteri Besar or Chief Minister as the case may be.

Two months after we celebrate 46 years of Independence we will have our fifth Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, and probably the smoothest leadership change in our history.

"Smooth" is the operative word here. No one, least of all Abdullah, wants the change to be disruptive. But even so, the Prime Minister-designate will have a lot on his hands.

The character of the Government will be what he makes of it. It will be shaped, of course, by his personality, political factors and anything else he might consider important in his onerous duty.

That's why I believe the best way to study the development of this nation and its highest office is by reading the biographies of its highest office-holders.

Having worked with all the Prime Ministers I can tell you this: It is worth-while becoming Prime Minister, even for two months. One major politician during Tun Razak's time begged to be allowed to be Prime Minister for just two weeks. Tun Razak thought him presumptuous but made him Minister of Defence. He never took the office.

The Prime Minister is all-powerful, even though liable to be pushed out, if he becomes obviously incompetent and corrupt. It is vitally important for him to manage the people around him - overtly and covertly.

In the British parliamentary system, prime ministerial leadership used to be non-departmental and was largely about style. The PM was primus inter pares in a Cabinet of fellow ministers. Tengku Abdul Rahman Putra, a cultured Anglophile, exemplified this to a greater degree than his successors and ran his Cabinet with a light touch.

Subsequently, however, as electoral politics became more intense and national emergencies and ambitions demanded a more concentrated exercise of power, the PM's job evolved from hands-off chairmanship to hands-on co-ordination and control.

British Prime Minister David Lloyd George introduced a Cabinet Secretariat in 1916 during the First World War, consisting of a few secretaries headed by a senior civil servant, the Clerk of the Privy Council.

That grew into the Cabinet Office, which then grew and grew. It grew in size and stature as government grew, and it grew in the effort to make government shrink, under the aegis of "reform".

Like No 10 Downing Street - a large suite of opulent rooms posing as a town house - the word "office" here is British understatement (perhaps out of modesty, perhaps to deceive the public about the true pretensions of government). Today, it is headed by a Minister for the Cabinet Office, a Minister of State, the Head of the Home Civil Service and Secretary to the Cabinet and the Security and Intelligence Co-ordinator and Permanent Secretary of the Cabinet Office.

Similarly, in Malaysia, the setting-up of the National Operations Council under emergency provisions, with Parliament suspended in the wake of the 1969 race riots, temporarily transferred absolute powers to Tun Razak, the director of operations. Upon becoming PM a year later, he returned the country to parliamentary democracy.

The advent of the New Economic Policy made the centralisation of authority and purpose equally urgent.

Today, we have the very considerable Prime Minister's Department, the over-lord of government ministries. It has four ministers, two deputy ministers, two parliamentary secretaries and the country's top civil servant, the Chief Secretary to the Government as well as a gaggle of political secretaries, special assistants and Press and private secretaries, and economic and special advisers. All of them are needed. In addition, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is also Minister of Finance.

So beholden are the ministers to the Prime Minister that it isn't a stretch of the imagination to picture them busily drafting their resignation letters in deference to Abdullah's upcoming imperium.

But they mustn't be too hasty. Ministers, though appointed by the King on the advice of the Prime Minister, are officially responsible to Parliament. In reality, it is to the PM and no one else.

According to the Constitution, the Prime Minister must tender the resignation of the entire Cabinet only if he ceases to command a majority in the Dewan Rakyat (though that is not likely to happen in the foreseeable future).

The PM may ask individual ministers to leave for other reasons; or they may offer to do so on their own, as beleaguered Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik has. In ordinary circumstances, however, they should not, for their offers of resignation can be grievously misconstrued.

Tun Suffian Hashim, in An Introduction to the Constitution of Malaysia, has this to say about Cabinet solidarity: "Collective responsibility means that if a minister disagrees with a Cabinet decision, he is nevertheless obliged to defend it in public; if he feels unable to do so he should resign."

How many have done so? In 45 years, a handful were sacked or forced to resign, rarely on their own accord. Some jumped the gun in 1987.

So an undue alacrity in their willingness to give up their offices could easily be seen as a lack of confidence in Abdullah. In any case, the present Cabinet has worked very well together for a long time, and has contributed substantially to the coherence of Dr Mahathir's administration.

Still, Dr Mahathir's impending departure has put some pressure on the longer-serving members of the Cabinet. I think Abdullah will do the obvious thing: assess their status in their own parties before deciding whether they should go - if the matter should come up at all.

Umno has a telling and often decisive influence on the other parties in the Barisan Nasional coalition. But unless he is forced to, Abdullah, like his predecessors, would be wary of wielding the big stick.

The performance of the Cabinet has more to do with governance than with politics and Dr Mahathir has done more than most to elevate competence over popularity in its composition.

Abdullah, in his wisdom, could choose to balance the two qualities more evenly, particularly in the key portfolios of Finance, Education, Information and Wisma Putra. There is plenty of conjecture about this and other personnel changes he might make down the line.

Talk is as much a part of politics as, say, ideology and policy. Some would swear that the buzz and chatter that pervades every party's machinery is the heart and soul of politics itself.

After all, the practice of politics is really about testing, measuring, gathering and marshalling support; so the talk, formal and informal, by loudspeakers in ceramah and in huddled whispers, on the party platforms, backrooms and warungs, is incessant. Politicians impress, cajole, speculate and, yes, gossip and conspire, even prostrate themselves.

Kissing the hands of the mighty in public is a norm now.

Politics, it is said, is the art of the possible. And what is possible is, at least to begin with, a matter for speculation. So some speculation is justified, even necessary, if only because political leaders must constantly be aware of where they stand, or indeed whether they are standing at all.

Not surprisingly, Abdullah's accession has turned the Umno grapevine into a babel. I have heard too much of it to give such idle speculation any credence.

Some of the expressed uncertainties are obvious, and for the personalities concerned, probably deserved. But the question of how cleanly Abdullah's new broom will sweep is largely moot. At this point, it is useless to secondguess him. Much will depend on the preparations for and outcome of the next general election.

From the first general election in July 1955 to now, the Umnoled Alliance and now the BN has never lost its majority in Parliament. As always, Umno will not be judged by whether it wins but by how much.

New patterns of politics have emerged since the last general election in 1999. Still, unless exceptional circumstances beyond our control crop up, the BN and Abdullah should win at the centre quite easily, provided that Umno and the BN components never underrate the Opposition, Pas in particular, nor overrate themselves.

It has been victory all the way. The positions of the civil service, business and the people are not the same today as they were before. They have changed the role of Prime Minister and the Government, just as they have changed that of the Opposition parties.

Politics is a perpetual fascination. It would be impulsive to lay down any hard and fast rules about the nature of the Cabinet. The Prime Minister is the best judge.