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The transition moves apace

Abdullah Ahmad

UMNO'S dominant status in Malaysian modern history guarantees one political fact: it has a multitude of obligations and, of course, not a few enemies. Such is the price of pre-eminence.

At no time in history has a dominant power not provoked envy, fear and dislike. The United States, the world's sole megapower, has many enemies who see the world through different lenses.

The Umno-led Barisan Nasional now wants to govern the whole country, a noble aim. Much as I wish it, it isn't likely to happen. Will the prospects get better? I doubt it.

Make no mistake, however: Umno is still the nation's Titan, not yet weary despite carrying heavy loads in Kelantan, Terengganu and other parts of the Malay heartland.

Umno has many strengths, resources, talents as well as weaknesses. It can choose when to fight its only serious and jealous rival, Pas - sooner rather than later, preferably before the autumn or winter. It will win at the centre.

Whatever his advisers say, only one man will decide when we go to the polls again: Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

I was asked to give my views on the political outlook in the country at a recent ASLI seminar. The following is an edited version.

`Allow me to put forward three keywords to help us gain a good perspective on the present political outlook in this country. Transition, change, and continuity.

As you all know, this year is the 23rd and final year of Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's prime ministership. He is set to retire from top office this October. Just a year ago, I was among those who was confidently predicting that Dr Mahathir would stay in office for life. But once again, he has proved that he is his own man, and makes his own decisions.

Obviously, Dr Mahathir's impending retirement has been the single most influential factor in the political outlook over the past year. This has been the scenario of transition. Those opposed to Dr Mahathir have perked up their post-Dr Mahathir strategies with anticipation, while those who have grown dependent on him view the future with trepidation.

And those who have positioned themselves as Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's acolytes are already making moves to become the flag-bearers in his administration. One of the former Deputy Prime Ministers has openly pitched his tent in Abdullah's camp, ready to manage the new headboy through his close relationship with Abdullah after Dr Mahathir's departure. This might or might not happen. But that's politics - such lobbying and jostling for power is common.

But then again, as the NST cartoonist portrayed in an editorial cartoon last week, nine months is a long time. In the case of a pregnant woman, anything can happen in between - premature delivery or a miscarriage.

But when Dr Mahathir goes, there should be reason neither to cheer nor to weep. The Prime Minister's retirement will not spell the end of Umno, as the transition to Abdullah has progressed more smoothly than relations with any of Dr Mahathir's three earlier deputies in the past.

Umno is generally satisfied with the present succession. Questions of the party hierarchy under Abdullah are interesting, no doubt, but there is an understanding of what might be useful speculation today, and what will have to wait for Abdullah to become PM before becoming clearer. I'm glad

he has assured that the major policies of Dr Mahathir will be scrupulously maintained.

However, there are few apprehensions in the party at this stage. Umno has done well since the 1999 general election. The Anwar Ibrahim factor will probably not play a big part in the next election, nor in the subsequent administration.

The Barisan Nasional, too, is managing change. The Barisan's Number Two partner, MCA, is in the process of its own leadership transition. But this should not pose problems for, as asked by *Mingguan Malaysia*, "What is so special about the party's president?" And MIC too might be considering a leadership transition, though that is not likely to happen in the foreseeable future. Gerakan will maintain status quo.

Sometimes, these transitions seem more fraught with acrimony than they are. But experience has shown that, even when the leadership challenges are bitter and hard-fought, our ruling parties seem to have a way of not throwing out the baby with the bathwater.

No one is a man for all seasons, and if making way for replacements and successors is an occasion for crisis and uncertainty, then we have not done well at all in maturing our party-political process.

Barring external circumstances such as the global economy, the impending war on Iraq and in the unlikely event of fractious spats among neighbours in the Southeast Asia region, I believe that when the sound and fury is done and the dust has settled, our principal ruling parties and their coalition will be intact as ever, and better equipped for the future.

The BN's Opposition, however, would hope to see opportunity in the present transitions. I think they will be disappointed. As I recently wrote in this column, Terengganu is not a sure bet for Pas, although Kelantan probably is.

Last week, Dr Mahathir was in Kelantan trying to salvage the situation there. He reshuffled the State party leadership. So I can't say that nothing has been done about Umno's degeneration in Kelantan. There have been some efforts but, plainly, they are not enough. With the new election rules and delineation of boundaries, it is possible that BN may win a few seats in Kelantan.

Pas' victory in Terengganu in 1999 was largely a protest vote, and the objects of that protest are being addressed. If Terengganu Umno puts up new candidates of high calibre, BN will stand a good chance of winning.

In Kedah, Perlis and to a certain extent Pahang, Pas may still hope for in-roads at the next election, which will be the 12th in our history. I believe they will be shown the backroads instead, as more voters recognise that the mainstream in Malaysia is a good and useful place to be; certainly a better place than anywhere Pas can take this country. Still, let us not underestimate Pas.

The DAP is, if you'll pardon the expression, a gone case. Perhaps it still serves some use, in almost the same way as an NGO, but when it comes to defending Chinese-community imperatives, I don't see that the BN's own Chinese-based components lack spirit and resolve.

In all, I expect the next general election, which must be held on or before November 2004, to result in another emphatic victory for the Barisan Nasional, with about three-quarters of the Parliamentary seats. Well over two-thirds, anyway, if perhaps less than the four-fifths majority this Government has been known to command in the past.

Dr Mahathir entered his final year in office with a clear and important agenda. He is leaving four principal challenges for his successor. First, the return of the English language to education. This got under way early this month, with the beginning of the new school year. Second, the return to meritocracy, which is to say, the gradual repeal of protectionist or

preferential policies. Third, the multi-racial ideal. And fourth, the containment of religious extremism, fanaticism and racial chauvinism.

Not a minor list for Abdullah to implement or carry forward, but what has been established is the feasibility and importance of these goals. The methodology may change, but the directions have been agreed upon, and set. What we want to achieve is stated. How we will achieve it will be up to future administrators.

So much for transition. What will change? Certainly, there will be a new style and tone to political leadership. The emphases may be different. Abdullah is not Dr Mahathir. There can never be another Dr Mahathir.

At the same time, comparisons of Abdullah and Dr Mahathir do justice to neither man. Perhaps, after 23 years of the Mahathir Administration, it would do the country good to have a change of pace at the top.

However, those who think Abdullah would be deficient or lacking as a Prime Minister and President of Umno are very wrong. They would be best advised not to test him, or they too will be holding handkerchiefs to their bloody noses.

But there will be changes, across the board, and through the rank-and-file of the public sector and corporate Malaysia. We should see new managers, younger and better trained, rising to the helm of Malaysia Incorporated.

We should see new blood emerge and rise in politics too. In Umno, the Youth and Puteri wings seem up to their role of nurturing new leadership. Umno's BN partners are also, to greater or lesser degrees, finding the fresh talent to carry on the national struggle.

So yes, there will be changes. Of personnel, and perhaps of policy, but not of politics, and not of direction.

In all that is keeping this country on an even keel and a steady course, we see the final aspect of the national challenge: continuity. There are some things I feel certain we would all wish to retain, no matter what changes come our way.

Paramount among these is the Barisan model of consultation, compromise and consensus. I believe I could make a case for these Three Cs being the most important factor in our uninterrupted governance since Independence. This was the model for the founding Alliance, and it remains the best bet Malaysia has on the future.

Our model works, and has worked for nearly 50 years. For a multi-racial country that spurns assimilation, the Three Cs are the only way to go. This is one continuity that all Malaysians would probably want to see.

Other continuities subtend from it. We want to see our economy remain healthy, resilient and accommodative. We want to see our education system grow from weakness to strength. We want to see less polarisation among our ethnic communities, and less divisiveness within our own communities for political or so-called religious reasons.

And we want to see less insecurity, more opportunities and greater well-being for all Malaysians. These have been blessings we have fought for, won and enjoyed more-or-less continuously since we set forth as an Independent nation 46 years ago.

It is now an inter-dependent world, despite the great schisms that have opened up between worlds and civilisations in recent times. Hopefully, Malaysia's independence need not be compromised by our continuing involvement in the world.'

I have been inundated with the question of who will be Abdullah's running mate. Well, I would be damned surprised if it was not Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak.

On Tan Sri Musa Hitam and Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, I reserve my comment for the time being.

However, I know some people will ingratiate and promote themselves at foreign missions and elsewhere, at the popping of a cork.

Malaysia and Umno will continue to manage transition and change for the sake of continuity of the things that matter most to us: peace, prosperity, harmony, stability and security.