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Working together for continued success

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TO SAY that we are spoilt for choice in the selection of people to lead us may amount to an exercise in self-deception. But we are luckier than the citizens of many post-colonial nations. We are blessed with enough capable people to lead us, and a system that has withstood the test of time.

It may not be a perfect system, but it works. Its success is even more commendable when we take into account the multi-ethnic and multi-religious nature of our society.

We see around us instances of multi-racial and multi-religious countries being torn apart. Even homogeneous societies are not always free of strife. Our success has a lot to do with the way we choose our leaders and the great measure of tolerance among our people.

Any worries that we may have over the ongoing transition from Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi could be caused by the lack of understanding of history or the refusal to accept history as a viable indicator.

Most of all, the worry is caused by the fact that we have grown used to living safely and comfortably under Dr Mahathir's leadership for over 22 years.

As the man himself has repeatedly said, a whole generation of Malaysians have grown up not knowing anyone else but himself as Prime Minister.

What most people have forgotten or have failed to realise is the fact that there was as much apprehension, if not uncertainty, when Dr Mahathir became Prime Minister in 1981.

But through the combination of personality, intellect and political savvy, he has been able to lead the country successfully through the best and worst of times.

He will be missed.

Who will be Deputy Prime Minister?

UNDERSTANDABLY, there is nothing much that can be done to stop people from speculating and making remarks about the post-Mahathir era.

The coffee shops, restaurants and cigar clubs will be full of such talk until Abdullah settles down in the job as Dr Mahathir's successor.

Among the hottest topics is who Abdullah will appoint as his deputy. Will it be Defence Minister Datuk Seri Mohamed Najib Tun Abdul Razak or Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin? Or, as some have been venturing to suggest, International Trade and Industry Minister Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz and Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Seri Dr Rais Yatim. Why not?

It does not always follow that the most senior Umno vice president ends up being appointed Deputy Prime Minister. Dr Mahathir himself was not the most senior vice president when the late Tun Hussein Onn made him Deputy Prime Minister in 1976.

He was not even the most senior Cabinet Minister, having been made Education Minister only in 1974. Takdir (fate) has a role too.

It was said that his choice as Deputy Prime Minister had been determined ahead of Tun Hussein's ascension and when Tun Abdul Razak was still alive. Tun Razak, it has been said, had indicated to Tun Hussein that he favoured Dr Mahathir as the future Deputy Prime Minister.

Tun Hussein, on his part, did the same for Tan Sri Musa Hitam when the latter was challenged for the post of Umno Deputy President by Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah in 1981. Tun Hussein was seen by the delegates as

favouring Musa when, in his last presidential address to the Umno assembly, he alluded to the importance of education.

Musa, who was then Education Minister, prevailed over the stronger and more charismatic Tengku Razaleigh. The Kelantan Prince was then Finance Minister and had been vice president since 1974. He was said to be more influential than Dr Mahathir and Musa in the Tun Hussein Cabinet.

Musa was never a vice president. The other vice president then was Tun Abdul Ghafar Baba. He resigned from the Cabinet, some say in protest, when Dr Mahathir was made Deputy Prime Minister.

But when Musa resigned in 1986, citing irreconcilable differences with Dr Mahathir, Tun Ghafar was appointed to replace him.

Impeccable backgrounds

THE PROBLEM for Abdullah, if any, is the fact that both Najib and Muhyiddin are capable, likeable and experienced.

Najib entered politics in 1976 when, at the age of 23, he won his late father's seat, Pekan, uncontested in a by-election.

In 1977, this scribe interviewed him at his family home in Jalan Eaton off Jalan Tun Razak. He spoke about walking in his father's shadow and of his desire to be his own man some day.

Since then, he has been the Deputy Minister of Energy, Telecommunications and Post, Education and Finance; Pahang Menteri Besar; and Minister of Culture, Youth and Sports, Education and Defence. He was Umno Youth Chief and has been vice president of the party since 1993.

Abdullah, on his part, served Tun Razak as principal assistant secretary to the powerful National Operation Council (NOC), which was effectively the government of the country following the May 13, 1969 racial riots. Tun Razak was its chairman.

It was during this period that Abdullah's profile as a dynamic young civil servant and future politician started to be noticed.

After a stint as Director-General of the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports, and Deputy Secretary-General of the same ministry, he plunged into active politics by contesting the 1978 general elections in Kepala Batas.

He was Deputy Minister of Federal Territory for less than a year when he was made Minister in the Prime Minister's Department in July 1981 by Dr Mahathir.

He moved up the ladder rapidly to lead the Education and Defence Ministries before being dropped from the Cabinet in 1987 following the failed 'Team B' challenge against Dr Mahathir. Abdullah was a member of that team.

When most of the team members left Umno to join Tengku Razaleigh in the now defunct Parti Melayu Semangat 46, he stayed on.

When he won the Umno (Baru) vice president post in 1990 and was made Foreign Affairs Minister the following year, this scribe asked Dr Mahathir why he brought Abdullah back to the Cabinet. He replied, 'Because Umno members want him.'

So, we can say that Tun Razak and Tun Hussein (who were related by marriage) and most of all Dr Mahathir played a major role in developing and nurturing Abdullah's political career.

Of course, we have to acknowledge that, above all, Abdullah comes from a well-known political and religious family.

His late grandfather was a great Islamic scholar and an astute supporter of Umno. His father was also an Islamic scholar and a State Assemblyman from 1959 to 1977.

Abdullah himself graduated in Islamic Studies from University Malaya.

Carrying on the 'supporting' tradition

MUHYIDDIN, the son of a religious teacher, entered politics in the early seventies after a stint in the Johor civil service.

He won the Pagoh parliamentary seat in the 1978 elections and in 1981 was made Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In the following year, he was promoted to the post of Deputy Minister of Federal Territory and in 1984 was transferred to the Trade and Industry Ministry.

He became Menteri Besar of Johor after the 1986 general elections and remained until 1995. After the 1995 general elections, he was transferred to the Centre as Youth and Sports Minister.

He went on to make a name for himself by being the key official in the successful hosting of the Commonwealth Games in 1998. He became Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs Minister in 1999.

Abdullah's dilemma, if any, is not about who to choose as his deputy but how to maintain the stability of the party and government after the appointment is made.

In the broader sense, it does not really matter which of the two Abdullah picks as his deputy. One is as suitable as the other.

What matters, however, is the ability of the key players to accept his decision and live up to their repeated pledges that they will respect his decision and support whoever he chooses.

Time to toughen up

THE most important thing is to ensure that Abdullah has the support to continue the major policies and programmes adopted before and during Dr Mahathir's time and formulate his own policies and programmes.

At the risk of being repetitive and running foul of propriety, this scribe would like to appeal to Abdullah to remain who he is, albeit with some minor tweaking here and there.

We know the 'Pak Lah' in him would like to continue to be nice to everybody. By all means do so. But it has to be borne in mind that while Pak Lah likes to be nice to everybody because that is his nature, not everybody that he is nice to may appreciate his gesture. They may even take advantage of his friendliness.

For instance, he may not want to stop people from coming to his office or his residence without prior notice or appointment, or jump into his car when the door remains open a tad too long or tell them that the time allocated to them is over.

But this could lead to some unscrupulous people thinking that they can be cincai with Pak Lah. Soon, his office and his residence will look like a wakil rakyat service centre.

He will also start noticing that more and more people want to see him off and welcome him home.

Personally, I think it is a waste of time and money - not to mention a security risk - when several ministers attend the same function simultaneously just because the Prime Minister or Deputy Prime Minister is present.

It would serve all of us better if we showed respect to our leaders by being in our offices generating wealth for the country.

If fewer people waited for them at airports and hotel lobbies when they come and go, they could go about doing their things faster.

Very often, ministers are held up at airports by these proposal-carrying businessmen and curry-favouring politicians, resulting in thousands of rakyat being kept waiting in the hot sun for hours before a function can begin.

Pardon this scribe for saying that keeping people waiting, especially those with appointments or invitations, is not very nice. Let us end this budaya menghantar dan menunggu and the gate-crashing.

In politics, being nice does not always pay. So, maybe we should not insist on Pak Lah continuing to be 'Mr Nice'. Instead, we should help him

continue being 'Mr Clean'. To be 'Mr Clean', he has to be tough.

Thus, it is heartening to hear him giving stern warnings about corruption and other forms of abuse by civil servants. But targeting civil servants alone is not enough. So is making threats and generating headlines. The government has to be tough.

Self-examination is good. Maybe the political system itself is equally at fault. Maybe we have given the rich and powerful so much leeway that some segments of the people think that they are being alienated.