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Shouldering a heavy responsibility

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IN the auspicious month of Ramadan, many important events had taken place in the nearly 15-century-old history of Islam. It all began with the first five verses revealed to Muhammad Abdullah, which saw him being appointed by God Almighty as the last Prophet and Messenger.

By this appointment, the Prophet undertook the heavy responsibility of leading mankind out of the Age of Ignorance and into the rightful path of Islam.

It took him nearly 23 years, but the Prophet succeeded in ending paganism in the Hijjaz Peninsular, establishing the state of Madinah and transforming the people into a single Muslim ummah.

The Prophet's efforts were then continued by the Khulafa' al-Rashidin, before being taken over by dynasties such as the Umayyad, Abbasid, Fatimid and others.

The success or failure of a civilisation lies with leadership. The Prophet of Islam had shown - through examples and deeds - on how best to be a leader. He enjoined important virtues such as trustworthiness (al-amanah), consultation (al-syura) and justice (al-'adl).

These three principle virtues became the cornerstones of the leadership of Prophet Muhammad. So to be an effective and good leader, these virtues must be present.

Personal charisma and oratory skills, while undoubtedly important, are not enough. Leaders are not judged by what they say or what they wear - but by the legacy they leave behind.

In Islam, leadership is an important religious obligation. A leader of a nation carries with him the responsibility and obligation to lead, administer and manage the Government and the nation.

The importance placed on leadership by Islam could be seen since the early days of Islam. Shortly after the death of the Prophet, the companions of the Prophet immediately appointed a leader.

From the perspective of the companions, appointing a leader - even at a time when people were mourning the passing of the Prophet - was imperative to ensure stability and continuity, and to ensure that the enemies of Islam would not take advantage of the situation.

Hence, the companions chose Abu Bakar al-Siddiq, who was one of the first to embrace Islam and who was closest to the Prophet, as the first caliph of the rule of Khulafa' al-Rashidin.

Ibn Taimiyyah wrote in al-Siasah al-Syar'iyah to the effect that: "It must be known that to appoint a leader is the biggest obligation in religion. Problems pertaining to the religion as well as worldly affairs could not be resolved until this matter (appointment of a leader) is first resolved."

For Malaysians as a whole, the event last Friday which fell on the fifth day of Ramadan was indeed historic. The appointment of Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi as the fifth Prime Minister of Malaysia was witnessed by millions.

This event was most definitely historic due to the fact that this "passing of the premiership baton" has only taken place four times in the country's 46-year old history since Independence. The last time was in 1981, when Tun Hussein Onn retired and the premiership was passed on to Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Malaysians who were born after 1981 - or even who grew up in the 1980s -

would only remember one prime minister. This should be viewed as a sign of political stability, where leadership change does not happen just for the sake of change.

Nonetheless, sooner or later, the task of being the country's leader needs to be passed on. As a responsible leader, Dr Mahathir did not simply leave it to chance or fate in determining his successor, but named Abdullah as his successor. This, as history would certainly note, paved the way to a smooth transition.

Hence, with the transition of power as witnessed last Friday, Malaysians have in fact ensured that there is no void or vacuum in the leadership of the country.

Resolving the issue of the appointment of the leader, as iterated by Ibn Taimiyyah has enabled the country to move on in tackling the many challenges being faced today.

It is therefore interesting to note that the fifth Prime Minister has outlined the primary target of his administration - to create a clean and efficient administration. He has also indicated his style of leadership that upholds the virtues of trustworthiness (al-amanah), consultation (al-syura) and justice (al-'adl).

Many observers have also commented on what the Prime Minister said: "Don't work for me, work with me". This rings close to what the Quran states, translated thus: "Help ye one another in righteousness and piety, but help ye not one another in sin and rancour."

Much has been written about the Abdullah's first week as "captain" of the "ship" called Malaysia. It is therefore not the intention of this article to further elaborate on the same, but to focus on the fact that leadership is a heavy responsibility - as the Prime Minister himself acknowledged in his speech in Parliament on Monday.

In Islam, the objective of politics and leadership is to obtain the pleasure of God as well as to succeed in both this world and the hereafter. This should not be compromised by other "more personal" and "materialistic" objectives.

When the leadership of any given country uses the objective of politics and leadership as outlined by Islam in their framework of action, then the country would be blessed and achieve success in all fields.

This country is said to have achieved the level of Baldatun Tayyibah wa Rabbun Ghaffur (a country that is prosperous and receives God's forgiveness).

One of the great Muslim scholars, al-Farabi, stated in his theory known as al-Madinah al-Fadhilah (the best country), that the purpose of the country is to achieve happiness (al-sa'adah).

To achieve the level of Baldatun Tayyibah wa Rabbun Ghaffur as well as al-sa'adah, the leader must be someone who is visionary, affirmative and respected. These three characteristics, when combined with virtues such as al-amanah, al-syura and al-'adl, would result in good leadership.

For a multiracial and multireligious country like Malaysia, a good leadership is compulsory. Without a steady pair of hands to steer Malaysia in facing this ever-challenging world, the harmony and unity of the country could be at risk.

The responsibility of becoming a leader is something that must not be taken lightly. The Prophet had warned against choosing people who are incapable of leading in one hadith related by al-Bukhari. The translation is thus: "When trust (al-amanah) is wasted, then destruction awaits".

The Prophet was asked further: "How is it that trust is wasted?" To which He answered: "If a matter is given to an unqualified person, then destruction awaits."

Malaysia is indeed fortunate for a variety of reasons. First, we have

witnessed a smooth transition between Dr Mahathir and Abdullah. This suave, civilised and democratic transition is unquestionably envied by many other countries.

Second, we are fortunate to have a leader who is humble yet capable in leading the country. This, coupled with his realisation of the heavy responsibility of a leader, is an assurance that the best is yet to come for the country and its people.

Third, the foundation for the development of Malaysia has been set forth by the country's previous leaders. Policies such as the New Economic Policy introduced during the time of Tun Abdul Razak and Vision 2020 introduced during the time of Dr Mahathir are pragmatic targets.

The task that lays ahead for Abdullah is to realise these targets while setting his own standards and goals for Malaysia to achieve.

This is a big responsibility for the prime minister. And for us Malaysians, it is equally our responsibility to support and be with our leader in building a better future for us all.

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