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The succession is assured

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IT was, to say the least, a memorable and moving general assembly. All being well, the leadership succession from Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi will be as smooth as Terengganu silk.

The results of the last general election showed a huge Malay divide. However, last week, Dr Mahathir was able to report to the delegates that the ruling party had recovered, that the majority of Malays and Bumiputera were reembracing Umno.

It has been an extraordinary journey. My wife, attending her first general assembly in 34 years of marriage, remarked, "What a seismic shift!"

I recall that in the middle of his Gettysburg address - delivered in just three minutes - Abraham Lincoln famously said that, "The world will little note nor long remember what we say here." His speech, of course, went on to become one of the most quoted of all time.

On Saturday, thousands pressed into the Putra World Trade Centre to hear perhaps Dr Mahathir's last appearance before the podium of the Umno general assembly.

This newspaper has proposed that a special assembly be convened to bid him a proper farewell and welcome Abdullah, as was done for Tengku Abdul Rahman Putra and Tun Razak in September 1970.

Dr Mahathir deserves an official send-off from the Government and Parliament as well. Tun Razak did one of the two, and the Tengku, in his conversations with me before he died, said, Saya kechil hati (I felt reduced and hurt) with his successor for not paying him the honour he felt he deserved.

The delegates and observers packed into the hall and surrounding spaces of the PWTC on Saturday wanted to take home something to cherish in their hearts, to freeze a moment of history in their memory, to bear witness to resounding words they could pass on to their children and grandchildren.

Some made a visible effort to hold back tears; others fixed a gaping smile on their faces, as if waiting for an encore. A few, like most of Lincoln's audience, came away a little disappointed.

They should not be; and neither should they lapse into the proverbial Malay penchant for forgetfulness. Dr Mahathir has never been known for verbal histrionics. He is a straight-talker who doesn't parlay soundbites.

Unlike Sukarno, and many of the Indonesian president's imitators of the past and present, he does not attempt to solve a problem with a shimmering slogan. Instead, he dissects according to a dialectic. He goes to the roots of problems to find their solutions.

Even so, Dr Mahathir's extempore declamations to the party faithful are never dull, not even to his worst critics. Above all, he is our great communicator - honest and austere, yet weighty with intellectual heft.

It is a measure of the obfuscation of politics in this day and age that the clarity of calling a spade a spade or, in this case, a European a European, can lead to controversy. The rhetoric of politics has become so wordy that simple truths can shock and awe.

The Western imperial impulse that Dr Mahathir warned of in his opening speech to the 54th assembly last Thursday is real and everpresent an inevitable extension and consequence of the West's superiority in almost everything that matters.

Western power in all its manifestations - in arms, economics, culture -

has grown so rampant that the fact itself ought to make everyone (including the Europeans) wary, if not alarmed.

Since the invasion of Iraq, neo-imperialism has flown out of the closet in America as well as in Britain, and even Down Under. What was once the fringe preserve of conservative hotheads is lurching into the mainstream of foreign and economic policy.

These ideologues not only compare American influence and prestige to the Roman Empire, but think the United States should go even further in shaping the world according to its image.

True, there is still considerable resistance from the European liberals, who will also be the first to protest at Dr Mahathir's exposition. But unbridled power skews to its own logic, and is driven by the compulsion to use it.

Dr Mahathir cited history to damning effect, and dares anyone to disprove him. I think no one will, at least for the Malay archipelago.

The Malay lands and islands had traded peaceably for centuries among themselves, with Chinese, Indians, Arabs and many others. The Europeans wanted this lucrative trade but had no goods to exchange. So they conquered.

They used force to drive out their competitors, to usurp control over the populations in order to monopolise supply and fix prices.

They cloaked their mercantile greed in Christian evangelism (in the Philippines and Indonesia especially), in loyal service to the glory of king and country.

But imperialism by force of arms was unsustainable, and indeed collapsed when its limits were exceeded. Western power, however, has hardly been set back. On the contrary, today's imperialism is immeasurably more refined and subtle, but no different in its essential aims - to conquer and subjugate, to exploit and profit - and therefore no different in the ultimate means with which to attain them.

This might sound like an unfair "generalisation" to some high-minded Western liberals, but Afghanistan and Iraq have shown that the waging of war has once again returned as the option of choice in the pursuit of national interests.

Of course, a war of civilisations might not come to pass nor history repeat itself. But that will happen only with awareness.

Dr Mahathir said it was not his intention to make enemies, only to elucidate the risks, dangers and challenges ahead. Neither is it racism or bigotry to seek a remedy for the crisis in the Muslim world caused by the malevolent impact of the West.

And it is not extremism, as the Asian Wall Street Journal seems to imply, to state clearly that such a remedy is needed for a Muslim community whose desperate response is the suicide bomber and his mentors and sympathisers in clerical garb.

It is absurd to suggest that a recognition of the threat of Western domination and its violent backlash can compromise Malaysia's zero tolerance of terrorism.

To meet the likelihood of a precarious future, Dr Mahathir went into the crux of the matter and made it the overriding theme of the party assembly: unity, national and Malay, a defining sense of purpose and core values that fortify morality, identity and independence. Against these stands Pas, the enemy of unity, whose reaction to the European onslaught is a regression to an elapsed and nearly forgotten Islamic past.

Pas was formed with British connivance to impair Malay solidarity in the struggle for independence.

It has remained, Dr Mahathir said, a "thorn in the flesh" of the Malay polity. On its own, it can't do much more. Only Umno, by division and

discord, can turn the Pas abscess into a mortal wound.

Umno had needed a rallying cry, and Dr Mahathir provided it. The assembly was an acclamation of party unity and resolve going into the general election. I was impressed and heartened by his words, for the only way to get Umno to fight on is to convince the rank and file, as Lincoln did, that the fight is far from over.

I joined Umno because of my public and private passion for making our nation a better place for all its citizens. Umno is a success story because it has always, to borrow Hillary Clinton's expression, taken a kampung to write it.

Umno succeeds simply because it is not best that its members should all think alike; it is the difference of opinion, as Mark Twain said, which "makes the horse races", and, if I may add, the Umno horse triumph.