

Shadow cabinet: A step not necessary
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COMMENT In politics, rash talk is cheap especially on the part of those who do not have the responsibility.

Right now, the cheapest bilge is the one about Pakatan Rakyat not having the guts to announce a shadow cabinet.

BN supremo Najib Razak had only ultra partisan political motives in mind when he alluded to Pakatan's lack of a shadow cabinet.

He attributed it to the absence of a plan to govern because, after all, he said Pakatan was only "a motley collection of parties and individuals who shouldn't really inspire confidence in the public."

This was how Prime Minister Najib last weekend set off a newly heightened phase in BN's Pakatan-bashing campaign when he officiated at an MCA-organised seminar.

His coalition ally, MCA president Dr Chua Soi Lek, took the cue, accentuating the shrillness of the BN rhetoric by attacking DAP rabidly before and during his televised debate with its secretary-general the same day.

Sure, credit the PM for elegant phrasing - "motley collection" is one of the more pithy phrases to drip from a Malaysian politician's arsenal in this election season - but debit him for amnesia about the history of his own party where unwonted haste in delineating the line of succession had been detrimental to its ability to allow talent to emerge from intra-party competition.

Succession based on pre-selection or appointment to the upper brackets of democratic groups is always a tricky issue.

In gestating political entities, even in mature ones, haste in this matter quite often results in choices that are a poor fit for the challenges the party might have to face.

Hence a calculated stall when it comes to establishing the line of succession by publicly announced allocation of portfolios is a wiser move, especially in coalitions that are still in the embryonic stage of their evolution.

Pressured by Mahathir

Najib had only to advert to his predecessor Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's coerced (by Dr Mahathir Mohamad) selection of him in January 2004 as an example of shortened gestation leading to heightened intra-party rivalry that complicates the task of meeting its challenges when these are at their most acute, as is the case with Umno at present.

Recounting what happened in that Abdullah-appoints-Najib episode helps make the point.

Abdullah had taken over from Mahathir as Umno president in late October 2003.

najib meet mahathir 040409 01He delayed appointing a deputy simply because he wanted to call a general election before holding the Umno internal election which would then anoint him as president and elect a deputy.

This process, albeit slower, enjoyed the advantage of being reliant on legitimate, democratic norms of succession and replenishment.

As with justice in constitutional polities, so with democracy in political parties: the succession process must not only be done democratically, it must be seen to be so.

However, an arbitrary note was introduced to the whole question of the post-Mahathir succession in Umno by Mahathir's sabotaging of the process.

He feared that Abdullah would appoint Muhyiddin Yassin. To forestall that move, Mahathir, still powerful despite having left office, pressured Abdullah to appoint Najib in preference to Muhyiddin. A dithering Abdullah obliged.

The post-Mahathir phase of succession in Umno, already fraught from the selection and spurning of three deputies (Musa Hitam, Ghafar Baba and Anwar Ibrahim) during Mahathir's protracted reign as president, was rendered even more tenuous by Abdullah's forced appointment of Najib as acting deputy president in January 2004.

The appointment gave Najib an undeserved edge in the race to succeed Abdullah: pre-appointed deputy presidents in Umno are seldom upended.

But the pre-selection of Najib was added fuel to Muhyiddin's ambitions.

Muhyiddin himself is rather down-the-line as a candidate for elevation in Umno, he being a beneficiary of the factional battles in the party as a consequence of Mahathir's prolonged tenure.

Damaging rivalry

What Umno has been witness to since January 2004 is a damaging rivalry in its upper echelons which, though it is conducted in camouflaged mode, is destructive to the party's ability to come up with viable responses to the challenge of its declining support.

Would this have eventuated had Najib beaten Muhyiddin - or vice versa - in the contest for deputy president in party elections in 2004 after Abdullah had been unchallenged as president following his thumping victory in the general election earlier that year?

A democratically elected choice made in the fullness of time in comparison to a forced appointment made in exigent circumstances pacifies the body politic whereas the latter roils it.

Pakatan's appointment of a shadow cabinet now would replicate Umno's practice of pre-selecting its deputy president - the only time it did not do so was once in the 1950s and in 1981 - and expose itself to destructive intra-component party and intra-coalition rivalries.

Such rivalries can be both plasma and poison to democratic political parties; the fact of it's being the one or the other dependent on the particular time the parties find themselves in.

There is no hard and fast rule but it is certain that an evolving political entity would be unwise to hasten the gestation of its talent and personnel that would emerge in due time, like those pellets that have to lie under the surface of water before they can flower.