

Umno, Dr Mahathir and the future
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Neil Khor

I refer to the Malaysiakini report Pak Lah has 'no shame' for refusing to quit.

There was a very loud and noisy conference in Petaling Jaya recently which came up with one simple resolution: Abdullah Badawi has to resign and be responsible for the BN's loss of two-thirds majority in parliament. The man who made that call even accused Abdullah of being 'shameless'.

In 2004, when Malaysians went to the polls, Abdullah Badawi was hailed as Mr Clean. He had been hand-picked by Dr Mahathir to be his successor. Abdullah made all the right moves then and Malaysia rewarded BN with the biggest parliamentary victory ever.

It seems that Dr Mahathir now thinks otherwise. Abdullah, he said claimed 100% credit for that victory (which he never did) and should shoulder 100% blame for the 2008 electoral result. In both instances, Dr Mahathir was wrong as he shares with the BN some of the responsibility for their last two electoral performances.

In 2004, if BN won big, it was probably due to what Abdullah represented rather than what he did. Abdullah then represented change. Dr Mahathir knows this to be true because he picked Abdullah to be his running mate in 1999 to save Umno from an even worse electoral performance. Any other choice would have meant more of the same. He chose Abdullah because the latter represented a break from his own legacy.

Abdullah's reputation assuaged Malay voters, at least those who voted on moral grounds. He was also the obvious answer to PAS, which emerged as the biggest opposition party after the elections. But Abdullah was the bridge to heal the Malay community. He was going to be the first Malaysian PM with a religious background and pedigree.

By 2003, Malaysians had grown weary of Dr Mahathir no matter how charismatic he may be. Dr Mahathir himself thought so and resigned voluntarily. This decision alone won the BN many votes. Similarly, Dr Ling had stepped down from the MCA but unfortunately Samy Vellu and Lim Keng Yaik stayed around.

Abdullah also campaigned under a 'reform' platform. That took the sting out of PKR. By freeing Anwar Ibrahim before his full term was up, Abdullah hoped to bury PKR as the party that was a personality cult fighting to free Anwar Ibrahim.

Dr Mahathir, being more astute and perhaps knowing Anwar better than anyone else, was less than happy. Unfortunately, anything that Abdullah did by way of reform would mean the dismantling of the Mahathir legacy.

How does one 'reform' the judiciary without acknowledging that there is something not right about it? Can we 'reform' parliament by expecting BN parliamentarians, so used to an iron-whip, to regulate themselves? How does one change the culture of patronage in Umno without hurting entrenched interests?

Abdullah tried by unleashing the press. When certain revelations were made about palaces

in Klang, the close-one-eye MP from Malacca and the Approved Permits issue, all fingers pointed at Mahathir. This was the product of his time and his era. Abdullah distanced himself from that legacy.

Dr Mahathir once claimed that he does not care how he will be remembered. Well, the reason is that he 'forgets easily'. To him, history is malleable. It can be twisted to fit contemporary needs. It was during his time that Yap Ah Loy was historically expunged as the founder of KL. So, why not reinvent oneself as a concerned citizen?

One has to respect Dr Mahathir for always speaking his mind. What is so unacceptable is that he seldom allows others the same right. But now that he is an 'ordinary citizen' he must accept the reality that unlike the British colonials whom he railed against as 'Che Det', the Malaysian government is neither as polite nor as intellectually sophisticated.

So, Dr Mahathir did what Dr Mahathir has always done best. He spoke up without fear or favour; he spoke without memory of the past and he attacked Abdullah savagely in any forum that would give him space.

Abdullah's reform platform was turned upside down. Emphasis was placed upon the activities of his son-in-law. Abdullah's biggest weakness was his lack of showmanship and this was exploited to the hilt. The entire reform agenda was lost in the ensuing cacophony of nepotism, corruption, vanity, avarice and incompetence. But all fingers now pointed at Umno, their own included!

Unfortunately, Abdullah could not battle these accusations with venom nor could his very smart son-in-law stay out of the fray. So, this mud-slinging match gave Anwar Ibrahim the time and space he needed to create new life for PKR. By merging with Parti Rakyat Malaysia and basically taking up that party's ideological struggle, the new PKR has political objective and charismatic leadership.

So now, a divided Umno will have to face a rejuvenated PAS and a strong PKR. Its fellow BN component parties have already been defeated by PKR and DAP. But more importantly, there is also the one-man party, Dr Mahathir, who makes so much noise that he threatens to prove addictive to a new generation of Malaysians.

It is therefore not fair that Abdullah Badawi must shoulder BN poor performance alone. Umno, too, must bear some of the responsibility. One would have thought that a 90% parliamentary majority would be large enough to make them act more magnanimously toward minority communities. Instead, the party stepped on everyone's toes, their BN component parties included.

Muhyiddin Yassin is correct when he said that a change of leader alone will not help Umno. The party must ask itself how it lost the middle ground to PAS. Why did the grandson of Onn Jaafar have to wave the keris in order to prove himself a Malay? How come the party felt most challenged when it had its biggest share of parliamentary seats in history?

Should the party 'forget easily' like some of its leaders, it might find itself being forgotten by the rakyat in the next general elections. In the meantime, it must ask itself whether it truly puts Malaysia before all.