

Hidden agenda behind 'Pak Lah, quit' calls
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In the aftermath of the 12th general election with the worst Barisan Nasional showing in history, the incumbent Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi has been asked publicly to accept responsibility and step down. None is more strident than the person who put him in office, the ex-prime minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad.
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Although Abdullah has indicated that he will make way for his deputy in due course, this does not satisfy Mahathir who demands that he step down immediately. Joining in the chorus are those aligned to Mahathir, some of whom probably have dreams of advancing their own political ambitions.

What is this urgency to force Abdullah to resign now instead of letting him choose his time to exit gracefully? The reason advanced by those making the demands is ostensibly that Umno needs to 're-invent itself' to gain back support. They assert that time is running out and to wait longer may mean that Umno's losses may be irreversible.

The reasons offered seem to be a thinly-veiled cover for other agendas. There is no reason why Umno's healing cannot take place under the present Umno president with the cooperation of other leaders. The very reason why Umno is in turmoil is the incessant public calls for Abdullah to step down. Those making the calls are the ones who make it difficult for Umno to find its footing and get back to work.

There is something fishy here as there appears to be a hidden agenda in the way Abdullah is being pressured to resign immediately to make way for his deputy, Najib Razak. Is Najib the charismatic leader who can turn Umno around? But he is no Anwar Ibrahim. Could it be that as a person with a tainted past, Najib is susceptible to being controlled?

But controlled by who? Although this is only my conjecture, there may be a clique within Umno who is fearful of losing power and hence the fruits of corruption after the dismal results of the elections. This group sees eye-to-eye with Mahathir and have no qualms about using his authoritarian methods of maintaining power. They fear Anwar's return to the corridors of power and feel that Mahathir is the only one who can frustrate him.

With Najib at the helm and Mahathir the real power behind the throne, repressive methods may be used to curtail democratic freedom and limit the opposition's space to operate. We may even have a media war against the opposition and an 'Operation Lallang 2'.

However, time is of essence. Abdullah stands in the way of iron-fisted methods as long as he is PM. Even 'worse', he appears to be pushing some genuine reforms such as judicial independence and press freedom which will make it difficult for authoritarian methods to be employed later. Furthermore, the longer the Pakatan Rakyat state governments operate, the more public support they are likely to engender with their fair and populist policies.

The way to rejuvenating Umno and Barisan Nasional lies in genuine reforms to repair the damage done to democratic institutions perpetrated by Mahathir. Hence, Abdullah is on the right track. Public support and rejuvenation of the party will come with real reforms. However, this means that Umno's culture of corruption and arrogance will have to change.

This may be anathema to those who depend on corruption to support their lifestyle and would prefer the return of Mahathirism to maintain their hold on power. As for Mahathir, although retired, we should not underestimate the menace this old man poses to our nascent democracy. Let us all rally behind Abdullah to oppose Mahathir's attempt to pull him down for his own nefarious ends.

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