

Limit PM's terms to 10 years max
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Of the previous four prime ministers that Malaysia has had, two have served for at least a decade (Tunku Abdul Rahman and Dr Mahathir Mohamad). While Tun Razak's tenure was cut short by his death, Tun Hussein Onn is the only prime minister the country has had who was essentially a one-term serving PM who then, depending on which historical account you believe, either voluntarily retired or was 'forced' into retirement in 1981. Of course, the Tunku also suffered a somewhat similar fate in 1970, but by then, he had in fact been PM for 13 years.

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One enduring lesson of Malaysian politics seems to be that prime ministers (and party leaders) tend to stick around far too long – and in some highly visible cases, in the process, creating institutional structures to consolidate their powers while undercutting the mechanisms of competitive politics essential in a vibrant and aspiring society. Fundamentally, I suggest that this cannot be healthy for advancing and nourishing a national democratic culture and ethos.

In fact, this dilemma is not peculiar to Malaysia; it seems to plague many developing countries. Not unlike some others in developing countries who grab power and find it hard to make way for others, Mahathir's 22 year hold on the premiership seems to rank right up there with the likes of Mugabe in Zimbabwe, Suharto in Indonesia, Marcos in the Philippines, and Lee Kwan Yew in Singapore. These trends become a major hindrance to cultivating young talent and building a culture of respect for democratic practices.

Indeed, as we have also seen with other lesser political positions in Malaysia (for example, the MIC president), when a self-absorbed political leader gains power, the tendency is to monopolise, and then frequently exploit it, for as long as possible. Indeed, some Malaysian politicians, even after becoming obsolete and stale, don't seem to have the self-respect and dignity to heed the people's message; instead, they continue to grab on to any means to justify staying on a little longer.

This anti-democratic culture of political monopolising has to be changed. The answer, I suggest, lies in having a constitutionally-required term limit for the position of prime minister. I believe a prime minister should be permitted to serve a second 5-year term but should then be prevented from holding the office ever again.

Obviously, such a constitutional provision would precisely prevent someone from using and manipulating the political process, party rulers and other such mechanisms to put a stranglehold on opponents within one's political party. Hence, the fact that if the leader of Umno, for example, could only serve for a possible maximum of 10 years as prime minister, relatively regular transitions in party leadership positions would not only be theoretically more likely, would well become a reality. Hence, the constitutional term limit provision would in effect compel a party like Umno to elect a new president after 10 years if it has any aspiration of having its leader be the prime minister.

While an opposition party or component parties that may not seem likely to win a majority in parliament may not be directly affected by the constitutional provision, the fact remains that the office of the premiership will see a regular, institutionally mandated, turnover.

And if, in the event that an opposition party or component parties like Pakatan Rakyat were to win a majority in parliament, their leader (and the eventual PM) would then be subjected to observing the same federal constitutional mandate of serving no more than two terms as prime minister. The effect of such a constitutional provision would invariably help democratise not just the highest elected office in the country it would also implicitly democratise party politics.

By this point, I can imagine the reader saying, 'Okay, but do you really expect those in power to pass such a constitutional provision which would undermine their self-interest? Not a chance in hell!' I agree.

But that is precisely why, like many other instances where politicians in control may not find it in their personal interest to promote changes, pressure needs to be exerted – by the public, interest groups, and by the few conscientious politicians we may have out there – to make this a serious agenda item for reforming the process by which the Malaysian parliamentary system works. As we have recently seen, when voters demand changes, sometimes, we are prone – eventually - to getting some of it.

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