

Abdullah PM not by virtue of being Umno president
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The 'transition plan' has rightly been described as 'bargaining over a trinket' and as childish gamesmanship that is flouting the spirit of the constitution and putting the nation in danger. As Dr Bakri Musa suggests in a recent article, the game players are eroding their own legitimacy. While they do so, our need for leadership deepens, and we lose hope that the BN's self-absorbed leadership will elevate the right man to the job.

1. Prior to the general elections of March 8, Umno commanded enough seats in parliament to act as if it could govern the country all by itself. The elections of March 8 removed the basis of that assumption. Umno won 79 seats in a 222 seat parliament. Of these, 13 are from Umno Sabah.

Sabah issues have flared up to such an extent that no Sabah politician can ignore them. Not even Umno Sabah politicians. The ground there rejects what it sees as 'colonisation' by the Umno-led peninsular government. There is now even a move to revive Usno.

This leaves 'Umno Semanjung', the parent party, with 66 seats. Less than 30% of parliament. Leadership of Umno comes with a far more tenuous claim on the national leadership these days. This fact seems lost on the incumbents.

2. The shadow play over the leadership by some members of the Umno Supreme Council is based on the assumption that the president of Umno is automatically the prime minister. This skips over a few crucial steps.

3. Abdullah Ahmad Badawi is the prime minister not by virtue of being president of Umno but of being chairperson of BN. The chairperson of BN is taken, by convention, to hold the confidence of the majority in the Dewan Rakyat. On such grounds, the Yang Di Pertuan Agong appoints him as prime minister.

4. These steps are not trivial. Umno may have forgotten them out of old habits of easy dominance. In the days when Umno could more or less make up a parliamentary majority by itself, it could talk of leadership transitions without regard for what component parties felt. In the days when BN commanded 2/3rds of the House with ease, it need not be asked if the chairperson of BN must also be the prime minister.

The prime minister-ship is indeed an appointed position. Appointed, that is, not by the outgoing prime minister but by the Yang Di Pertuan Agong, on the basis of DYMM's estimation that the appointee commands the confidence of the majority of the members of the Dewan Rakyat.

5. In the light of this, all this talk about a transition plan worked out in secret one-on-one meetings between the incumbent and his deputy is very presumptuous.

a. It presumes that Abdullah is the president of Umno when the 'transition' occurs, whereas he must first face party elections.

b. It presumes that Umno will gain automatic assent from the component parties to whatever it determines

c. It presumes that the Yang Di Pertuan Agong will continue to adopt the convention – and this is no more than a convention – that the chairperson of BN is to be appointed prime minister.

In making these large assumptions the schemers behind the transition plan do not just 'tread roughshod over the rights of party members' as Tengku Razaleigh put it, they take for granted the support of component parties for their solution, support that might not be forthcoming in a BN that has almost been destroyed at the elections, and makes the Yang Di Pertuan Agong a rubber stamp for their choice.

They have forgotten that the seat of sovereignty in this country is the Yang Di Pertuan Agong, representing the Malay Rulers. Not the Umno Supreme Council.

At a time when Umno Semenanjung only holds 1/3rd of the parliamentary seats, I don't see why the nation should give Umno's warlords the time of day to make these assumptions. They can no longer skip the steps in the chain of legitimisation sketched above to get to the answer they want, without respect for their own members, the rakyat, the Rulers and the federal constitution.

There are other reasons why the government is losing legitimacy:

a) This administration has basically ignored the recommendations of two royal commissions of inquiry.

b) This administration has abused the ISA. By the home minister's own admission, the ISA has been used for reasons other than those which can alone justify its use, and used on persons who were not deemed threats to national security.

The minister declared that journalist Tan Hoon Cheng was detained for her own protection, and Teresa Kok was detained for investigative purposes. No less than the former minister of law has now suggested that it has been used as 'an instrument of oppression.'

c) This administration has demonstrated incompetence and gross negligence of duty in its handling of the economy. While we face a global economic calamity it has been fixated on its backroom politics rather than an economic plan.

It has no action plan, no emergency plan, for the looming crisis. Meanwhile, the markets have dived, capital is exiting and inflation has reached a 27 year high. The administration's handling of race relations has also been poor. The races are more polarised than ever.

d) Umno is, without doubt, trapped in the cycle of money politics. Money politics makes a mockery of the outcomes of elections. But our present leaders not only show no sign of having a handle on the problem, their postponement of party elections abets money politics by increasing the length of the campaign period and thus increasing the cost of contesting.

By moving party elections to March next year, Umno, and hence the national leadership, would have spent a full year in party electioneering. This must be some kind of world record. Meanwhile the rakyat wonder who is running the country.

The country is in a leadership crisis. As a young country we walk a narrow path. We cannot continue blind and directionless as we are under our present leaders. If we slip, we slip a long way down. Before we throw up our hands in despair, however, let's each try to list

down the leadership qualities we think are needed in this time of crisis. Here is my job advertisement:

Because our communities are polarised as never before, and because the last resort of political scoundrels in this country is to pit the races against each other, we need someone respected and trusted by the Malays and also by all the other races.

Because we need reform and a restoration of rule of law, we need a leader committed to those objectives. Reform will be resisted by those who have benefited from our subverted institutions. It must be led by a person of unblemished reputation, untainted by even the whiff of scandal.

Because corruption is bleeding this nation and money politics is us, we need a leader of integrity, uncorrupt and incorruptible. He will have a fight on his hands.

Because we are now adrift without a plan, we need a leader with both executive capability and vision, capable of drawing up a plan for the nation and making it happen. And we have run out of time for someone to learn on the job. We need a leader of proven ability to get the entire country buzzing and working together again.

We do have such a leader in our midst, and he has offered himself for national leadership from within the very party that is so in need of reform.

It comes as no surprise that the party's bosses set little store by talent and fear integrity. I can only pray that somehow, our political system has enough strength left in it to put this man where the country needs him.

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