

PM deserves credit
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Shepherd

My first assessment of Pak Lah as a leader of Malaysia was when he was delivering the traditional prime minister's Hari Raya Aidil Fitri address to the nation over TV soon after taking over from Dr Mahathir Mohamad in Oct 2003.

Pak Lah's speech was refreshing as he chose to celebrate the occasion in the true sense of community-building that Aidil Fitri is intended to be and not use it as yet another occasion to spin politics like what Mahathir used to do.

Soon after that Pak Lah came out with a raft of promises that created a sense of optimism amongst Malaysians and he went on to win an unprecedented victory in the 2004 general elections.

The 2004 victory, however, proved to be hollow as hardly five years later he was delivered an unprecedented loss in the March 2008 general elections and has now been driven to retire rather unceremoniously.

So has Pak Lah really failed Malaysians as a leader? The answer to this question really depends on how we choose to measure his success.

As for me, the measures that I use to assess Pak Lah's performance as a prime minister include those related to where Mahathir, to put it charitably, had little interest in. True, Mahathir managed to develop the Malaysian economy and create recognition abroad, albeit not always positively.

During his tenure, Mahathir was all too consumed about economic development which was to be implemented according to his interpretation of what the country and people needed with scant attention to engaging the many stakeholders in this country who were often considered as an impediment to progress.

To Mahathir, the legitimacy of his style of governance was to be tested at the ballot box both national and Umno. Having won an election - however flawed the process and size of victory was - he assumed that he had complete authority to manage the country with no room and tolerance for competing views including civil society, political opposition and institutions like the judiciary.

Further, the economic largesse of this country belonged to those who had voted for the Barisan Nasional and to those in positions of power in Umno and their key allies in the BN.

The results of Mahathir's economic policies and style of governance are at best patchy. There are indeed successes but also significant failures with the size of the latter increasingly eclipsing the former towards the end of his administration.

Not to forget the corruption and wastage with neither a sense of remorse nor intent to overcome. Add to this, a talent vacuum not only to succeed him but also at many echelons of the political leadership of this country.

His recent statement that all the aspirants for the post of Umno deputy president other than

Muhyiddin Yassin are 'jokers' is an indictment of his governance of Umno.

In short, Mahathir left behind a legacy of having contributed to the prosperity of Malaysians during his tenure but a governance system and policies which ironically threatened the sustainability of the very economic development that he was and continues to be preoccupied with.

It was thus indeed courageous and honest of Pak Lah to recognise, accept and lay bare the many aspects of governance and economic management that needed to be overhauled and fixed failing which we risked not only losing all that we had achieved but also missing out on opportunities.

The ensuing baring of the closet with the skeletons spilling out into the open whilst ghastly, was something that was necessary to show Malaysians the criticality of the crisis facing this country.

Not many politicians would have dared to expose such shortcomings of a predecessor who whilst no longer in power, had left behind not only an ideology but also a whole network of people who not only still swore allegiance to him but also revered his persona.

Pak Lah could have chosen to sweep things under the carpet and live in denial but he did not and that in itself is an act of leadership.

However, the issues recognised by Pak Lah were not new but things that have been aired and debated for years by stakeholders outside the administration such as the political opposition and civil society which Mahathir considered not credible or worthy of engagement.

Pak Lah's contribution was thus to give credibility to these issues and it made a big impact on the voters' minds who had been conditioned to think that Umno/BN are saintly and can only do good.

No doubt the proliferation of cyber media tremendously altered perceptions of Malaysian voters but the fodder was provided by the gamut of issues which were not only denied but recognised overtly and subtly by Pak Lah.

Whether Pak Lah's action was yet another aspect of his inaptitude is irrelevant as the result was that the ground was made fertile for the emergence of strong and credible alternative competing political forces in Malaysia.

Pak Lah's failure to deliver his promises is not surprising. In any case, not many serious critics of Malaysian politics expected that he could do so anyway. Not because of a lack of resolve and sincerity but the lack of aptitude and gumption on his part to effect the change in the face of powerful resisting forces.

His agenda for change thus remained propaganda spewed by his sycophants and spin-masters to sustain their relevance in his administration. Whether Pak Lah gets a chance to deliver his promised reforms during his remaining days is no longer relevant, for even if he does, there's not much optimism that these reforms would be implemented by the new administration.

Instead these new pieces of legislation could yet become new legal tools to be selectively used for political expediency, a hallmark of the BN. Bear in mind that Malaysia has one of

the best set of laws in the world but their poor and selective implementation creates injustice and mars our reputation.

The responsibility and hope to bring about significant change in Malaysia thus resides with forces outside of Umno and BN be it politicians or civil society. Pak Lah's contribution to this would have been giving the stamp of approval on the case for change from within Umno/BN.

For this Malaysians should give him due credit because it is no mean feat given the constraints he had worked within and the herculean challenge that he dared venture into.

Credit, however, should not be to the extent of idolising him as 'Bapa Demokrasi' as proposed by Koh Tsu Koon for this would be the continuation of yet another unhealthy aspect of Umno/BN culture which hero worships its leaders.

An objective analysis would show that all of our leaders have had their share of successes and failures and glorifying them would deny future generations the right learning opportunities that history can provide.

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