



Sense and Sensibility

Rather than diverting the attention to the propriety of former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's behaviour in questioning some of the present administration's decisions, wouldn't it be more sensible to justify these decisions and put any doubts to rest?

THERE appears to be a need to remind ourselves and our politicians that there is a difference between being a politician and being a leader. A politician is not necessarily a leader, but in our system, a leader is usually a politician.

On and off, we do see people who are not politicians being co-opted into the government. Some remain non-political, but most find the lure of politics too tempting that they eventually do take up politics actively.

Our Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, is a seasoned politician. He is a survivor, a terribly good one at that. His *modus operandi* is simple – be nice to people irrespective of whether they support you or not. Simply put, he is a born 'nice fellow'. And we Malaysians are suckers for nice people. Abdullah knows that. So, he is nice to everyone.

When he was struggling to keep his political career afloat after the 1987 debacle, when he joined 'Team B' in a futile attempt to unseat Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, his message to all and sundry was simple – *tolonglah Pak Lah* (please help Pak Lah).

That was the very thing he said to me when I called on him at his modest 'office' in downtown Kuala Lumpur months after he was dropped from the Cabinet in 1987.

He was his usual courteous, friendly self despite knowing that the newspaper that I was then editing, *Berita Harian*, was for Dr Mahathir and vehemently against his 'Team B'.

During the 2002 Pendang (Kedah) parliamentary by-election, he came to my village and was introduced to my father. They struck out famously because my father is his late father's contemporary in religious education and rural Umno politics.

How nice is nice?

Since then, whenever I called on him or bumped into him in public and had the opportunity to exchange pleasantries, he would invariably ask, '*ayah apa khabar* (how is your dad)?'

That melted my heart. Whatever anger I had

dissipated. That's what it should be as human beings. But whereas I am a simple human being, Abdullah is the Prime Minister. And the nice Pak Lah must give way to other more concrete qualities like being firm, effective, proactive and, most of all, convincing.

By right, Pak Lah the nice man should have been gone a long time ago. He should have gone away when Dr Mahathir appointed him over Datuk Seri Mohd Najib Abdul Razak as Deputy Prime Minister in January 1999.

He is no longer that man. He is the Prime Minister. It's now the turn of the people to say, *Pak Lah tolonglah* (Pak Lah please help) – anything from giving my graduate daughter a job to not raising prices at will, keeping his word on fighting corruption and abuse of power, protecting the interest and sovereignty of the country and thousands of other *tolonglah*.

He has been Prime Minister for nearly three years now. He cannot go on hiding behind the 'Mr Nice' façade or pleading with the people not to doubt his *niat ikhlas* (sincere intentions). He has to be tough and, above all, he has to be clear in his thoughts, pronouncements and actions.

An image problem

Here lies the problem. Whereas his attempts, mostly at the behest of his youthful and inexperienced aides and advisers, to restructure the economy are laudable, the short-term effects they are having on the country and the people are, mildly put, very painful.

The prices of goods and services are spiralling, investment returns are mediocre, economic growth is trailing the more robust regional economies, the inflow of foreign direct investment is tentative, job creation is falling behind labour supply and crime is perceived to be rampant.

The general perception is that the Prime Minister listens too much to these young, foreign-educated and untrained aides and advisers who have little or no experience whatsoever in managing grass-roots affairs and issues.

The Abdullah that I know was 'smoother' and more genuinely liked when he was served by older and more seasoned advisers and handlers like the late Datuk Abdul Fatah.

His image problem has been further compounded by what is seen as 'extraterritorial' encroachment by his immediate family members who are widely acknowledged to be actively involved in business and politics.

I don't believe that it is Dr Mahathir's intention to precipitate Abdullah's removal as Prime Minister or Umno President. Abdullah was his choice and he went out of his way to promote and protect him in the party and government.

To give a personal perspective, allow me to recall Dr Mahathir's reaction to my decision to allow the *New Sunday Times*, which I was then editing, to publish an article by freelance writer Askiah Adam in which she described the Umno Supreme Council's 'no contest' decision for the post of deputy president as 'dereliction of duty'. He was very angry.

It was that decision that literally elevated Abdullah to the post of deputy president in 2000 when he won uncontested. Abdullah himself thought the article was a bit too bold. I remember this because it was published on *Hari Raya Puasa* day, and I visited both Dr Mahathir and Abdullah.

Thus, if Abdullah's position as Prime Minister and Umno President is unassailable, he owes it to Dr Mahathir. It was the latter who used his vast influence in the Umno Supreme Council to 'confirm' Abdullah as deputy president.

On June 25, 2002, Dr Mahathir literally forced the Supreme Council to make the announcement that 'Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has named Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi his successor, when he resigns as Prime Minister in October 2003.'

This is not about Dr Mahathir not liking Abdullah the man. His complaints are on substantive issues, starting with the issuance of approved permits (AP) for the importation of motorcars, which he thought was detrimental to the national car projects, especially Proton.

Excuses, excuses ...

Thus far, Abdullah has resorted to anything from stonewalling to pacifism. He has not said much about the questions raised by Dr Mahathir, preferring to leave them to Najib and other ministers to respond.

Some say it's Abdullah's non-confrontational style, but

a growing band of critics think it is the politician Abdullah in motion. They argue that Abdullah considers himself above Dr Mahathir and thus above the fray.

But others say Abdullah is avoiding a direct confrontation with Dr Mahathir because he acknowledges Dr Mahathir's oratorical skills and depth of knowledge.

But the time will come when Abdullah can no longer say that he is open to criticism because this is a democratic country. Hiding behind such excuses will be counter-productive in the long run. At some point, public opinion will start to have some bearing on his ability to lead and rule.

For now, he seems happy to leave the fighting to the likes of Datuk Seri Mohd Nazri Aziz, Datuk Shahrir Abdul Samad, Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein and the

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newly-minted Tun, former Deputy Prime Minister Musa Hitam.

The real defender, however, is Najib. This is because Najib is desperate to prove his undivided loyalty to Abdullah while at the same time being closely identified with Dr Mahathir.

Najib might not have had a taste of the Deputy Prime Minister's post had Dr Mahathir not made it a condition for his appointment of Abdullah as Prime Minister. So persistent was Dr Mahathir about securing Najib's future that he broke the convention by insisting that Abdullah name Najib as his deputy when Abdullah himself was still the Deputy Prime Minister.

Pak Lah tolonglah

So putting up Najib as the first line of defence against Dr Mahathir is a double-edged strategy for Abdullah. By forcing Najib to forsake Dr Mahathir, he is forcing the Deputy Prime Minister to align himself more closely with him instead of remaining grateful to Dr Mahathir.

Considering that Dr Mahathir has a special affinity for the first-born son of the late Tun Abdul Razak, an outright confrontation between Dr Mahathir and Abdullah, should it happen, will not only worsen Najib's dilemma, but may jeopardise his political career.

Even without the Mahathir-Abdullah tiff, Najib is already being closely watched and monitored by Abdullah's loyalists, family members and aides.

Given the fact that three Deputy Prime Ministers in recent times – Musa, the late Tun Ghafar Baba and Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim – did not get to become Prime Ministers, Najib cannot be too sure about his own chances.

So Najib is well advised to choose his words carefully. He cannot say too much or too little. Since Abdullah has embarked on reversing and amending Dr Mahathir's policies and programmes, there's nothing to stop Najib from doing likewise with Abdullah's policies and programmes if he ever gets to become Prime Minister. So he shouldn't be speaking too soon.

Najib's defence of Abdullah, judging from what was front-paged by the *New Straits Times* on June 8, cannot be classified as brilliant. He was quoted as saying: 'I'm appealing to all leaders, party members and the *rakyat* to give full support to the PM. After all, Pak Lah was given a big mandate by the people.'

Supporting or not supporting Abdullah is not the issue with Dr Mahathir. What he is demanding is for the government to explain the many matters that he has so far raised.

Maybe there is a need to remind Najib that it is because Abdullah was given a big mandate by the people that there are today more voices demanding him to deliver his promises and criticising him for bringing hardship to them instead.

Taking the bull by the horns

Despite his attacks on Abdullah, Dr Mahathir is not likely to lead any real attempt to oust Abdullah nor will he stick his neck out to promote Najib.

From my conversations with him, I sense that he has become skeptical and cynical about the sincerity, gratefulness and commitment of his former Cabinet members.

He even thought that MIC President and Works Minister, Datuk Seri S Samy Vellu, did make the statement blaming him for the failure of the Indian community to achieve its 3% equity ownership target during the 8th Malaysia Plan period. But he said he accepted Samy Vellu's denial because 'he is my friend'.

The events of the last two-and-a-half years have driven a wedge between him and members of his former Cabinet.

Asked by the foreign press during the June 7 press conference if he would champion the removal of the Prime Minister, he said: 'I cannot have him removed. It is for his own party to remove him, for Umno to remove him. I am not helping. I am not going to go around

campaigning and telling people "please remove this man". But I am very supportive of Umno, my party.'

That last statement – 'but I am very supportive of Umno, my party' – has led many people to conclude that Dr Mahathir may not stay neutral should there be a move by Umno to censure or change its leadership.

With that kind of response, it is not surprising if Abdullah's next move is to mobilise party members to pledge support for and loyalty to him. This, in turn, will instantly plunge the Umno masses into a state of confrontation because Dr Mahathir still has a strong following, especially among the veterans and the younger members.

A former minister and once close ally of Dr Mahathir thinks that Abdullah has made a tactical error by neglecting to accord his old boss simple courtesies like keeping him informed of major decisions. He wonders that if Abdullah and Najib could call on Dr Mahathir to brief him on the 9th Malaysia Plan, why couldn't they have sought his views on other matters?

Reading the mainstream newspapers and watching television will not give the true picture of what's happening on the ground. Even when they publish or broadcast criticism levelled at Abdullah and his administration, such criticism is toned down and glossed-over.

Surfing the Internet and reading the alternative publications will give a different view.

The way to mitigate the snowballing effects of Dr Mahathir's criticism is for the Government to come out, once and for all, with convincing arguments on all issues and the questions he has raised.

Saying that Dr Mahathir was wrong on all points, like Nazri has been doing since the bridge cancellation, without countering them is not going to help convince the people that the Government is telling the truth.

Almost two months have passed since the crooked bridge project was cancelled, but the Attorney-General is yet to come out with the promised explanation on the so-called legal implications that drove the government to make that decision.

But with other more immediate concerns on their minds like the escalating cost of living, the threat of higher unemployment, job insecurity and rising rates and charges, the people are not likely to swallow such explanations hook, line and sinker.

The Abdullah Government may not be on the brink of collapse, but how it responds to Dr Mahathir's criticism and to the growing public disgruntlement will determine its future, especially in the next general election. **mb**

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