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# Enter Najib, man of the hour

• By Kamrul Idris

All of Malaysia's prime ministers step into office at fateful moments in the nation's life.

Perhaps no other leader appeared at a more pivotal historical juncture than Tun Abdul Razak Hussein, who took over from the father of Independence, Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra, when the country stood on the precipice of destruction following the May 1969 general election.

In a little over five years as premier, Razak brought the broken polity back together, redefining Malaysia from the ground up — in the Rukunegara, the Barisan Nasional, New Economic Policy, the second Five-Year Plan and a raft of social engineering projects.

At the fork in the road before it, he made the right turn towards nation-building, swerving the country away from the failed-statehood faced by most of its contemporaries in the post-colonial world.

Razak remains the least questioned of Malaysia's stewards, an aristocratic avatar of duty, loyalty, selflessness and hard work.

a hero and saviour.

He left few mementos. But the image of the man in heavy spectacles, bush jacket and walking stick, tramping the newly cleared hectares of a Felda settlement, with miles to go before he slept, has stayed in the national subconscious.

His death just before his 54th birthday in 1976 left a name and an incomplete legacy that beckoned to be carried on.

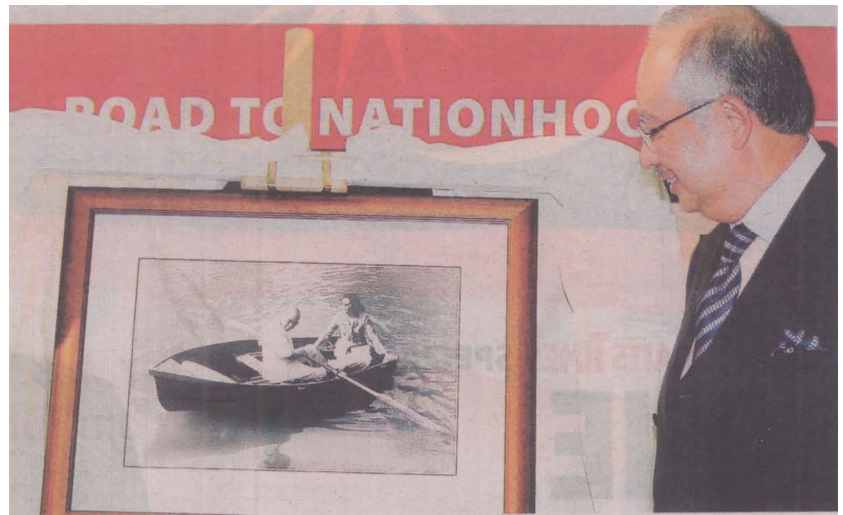
In the grand sweep of things, there was never any doubt that that greatness would be thrust upon his eldest son, Datuk Seri Najib Razak.

Announcing his retirement as prime minister last October, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi hinted at the logic of a succession rich in symbolism. "I am the last of the Tun Razak generation. After this there will be no more. Razak's son will lead the new government."

The parallel is more than hereditary. Both ascended unexpectedly from predecessors who, relenting to internal pressure, had graciously made way. Both were bequeathed the top job in an hour of need.

Malaysia is today nearly as divided as it was in 1969, perhaps more so in the class faultlines that cracked open in the March 8, 2008 general election. The house that Razak built is creaking under the weight of the extra storeys piled upon it, its foundations too slight for the massive expectations that have accrued over a generation.

It won't be a joyride for the scion. Najib inherits his father's mantle at a time when those expectations have never



Datuk Seri Najib Razak unveiling a picture of his parents at the launch of the 'Road to Nationhood: Unity Amidst Diversity' exhibition in Kuala Lumpur.

looked less likely to be met. The notion, indeed ideology, of wealth redistribution through an expanding "economic cake" is being undermined by a vertiginous global recession whose bottom has not yet been found.

Najib also heads a government without a two-thirds majority in Parliament for the first time since 1969. BN's "big tent" is tattered and Umno is struggling to reinvent itself from the caricature it has sunk into since its worst electoral outing a year ago.

As destined as he may be to follow in his father's footsteps, let

it not be said that Najib qualifies as the fixer of Umno and the BN's fortunes by pedigree alone.

He has earned his political stripes, winning his father's parliamentary seat of Pekan without contest at the age of 22 five weeks after Razak died, becoming menteri besar of Pahang and then joining the federal Cabinet at 32.

Najib's ministerial experience is unmatched in its length and breadth — a key job specification in a crisis, from which salvation depends on exercising the engine of government to the fullest.

He did not struggle when thrown into the deep end, contriving two stimulus packages in his first few months as finance minister, which combined into the biggest economic rescue operation in the nation's history.

Only marginally ahead of his son. Razak was an old hand at politics and government by his mid-30s, putting his stamp among others on an education report and a "Red Book" in rural development that remain policy templates to this day. He was the Tunku's able deputy for a dozen intense years. But it will not be in cabinet

portfolios that father and son will be most keenly compared.

Razak was an architect of change, and part of the tiny coterie of statesmen that pulled the country through its most radical alterations of all — from colonial subjection to independence in 1957, and from independence to sovereign sustainability in the long slog afterwards.

Although the historical contexts differ, not a lot less is expected of Najib. And he knows it.

"Change" was mentioned at least 18 times in his deputy president's speech at the Umno Youth, Wanita and Puteri annual conferences on March 24.

Najib might not have all the answers yet but, as the change agent the new party president and prime minister is very likely to be, he recognises all the problems with clear-sighted candour.

Whatever the carping and calumnious opposition may say, he is the best person for the transformational task he has taken upon himself to accomplish.

Najib is, after all, his father's heir.

“ I SAW THE CHANGING OF GUARD ON FRIDAY AND IT WAS A UNIQUE PROCESS NOT BECAUSE IT WENT ON WELL, BUT BECAUSE THE MANAGEMENT STYLE OF THE CHANGES GAVE A POSITIVE IMAGE TO THE COUNTRY. ”

— SAID ON THE SMOOTH TRANSITION POWER FROM TUN DR MAHATHIR MOHAMAD TO DATUK SERI ABDULLAH AHMAD BADAWI IN 2003.



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