

A NUMBERS GAME

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It is the honourable intention of Dr Mahathir to hand over the premiership to Anwar, but there are other forces at play, by **K.K.TAN**

THE biggest challenge facing our government today is actually the economy and how the country should move forward to achieve greater economic success.

From the layman's point of view, our economy — drained from the massive losses, leakages and corruption of the previous government — does not seem to be doing well, although macro indicators suggest otherwise.

The current government may be doing its best but it may take more time for the positive effects to filter down to ordinary people.

Also, crude oil prices are down, which is out of our control. A major sector of our economy, the palm oil industry, is in a crisis with discrimination against its use in Europe and elsewhere — low prices and high stocks overhang.

Besides manufacturing, the automotive sector (due to the Proton project initiated by Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad) and ICT (due to the MSC Project, also initiated by Dr Mahathir), Malaysians are not very knowledgeable and skilled in other sectors. This is partly due to the failure of our education system. The lack of knowledge and skills in many other sectors and the positive spin-offs of the Proton Project could be the reasons why Dr Mahathir is now keen to embark on the third national car project to boost our economy.

However, much of the focus of some politicians of the new government seems to be distracted by politicking, especially on the apparent power struggle to succeed Dr Mahathir or the viralled calls for him to resign. There is nothing wrong in a democracy to remove a sitting prime minister as long as the due process of the law is followed and respected.

Last May 15, less than a week after the 14th General Election, I



Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, with Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim and other ministers at a press conference after the Pakatan Harapan presidential council meeting in November. FILE PIC

wrote an opinion piece in a local paper on the qualities needed for our newly elected political leaders to govern New Malaysia. They must possess integrity, fairness, wisdom and humility. I made a big distinction between being smart and being wise — wisdom is much needed now, and it can only come with age, experience and making honest mistakes.

An important new criterion, especially for the position of the next prime minister, is the high competence needed to manage and chart our diverse and complex economy. I had written another piece in July about the importance of integrity for our leaders and about the tacit agreement amongst the Pakatan Harapan parties for Dr Mahathir to hand over the premiership to Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

There was confusion then on what was actually the agreed period for Dr Mahathir to step down and for Anwar to take over. Was it just for two years or more? PH secretary-general Datuk Saifuddin Abdullah had stated that there was actually no time frame agreed for Dr Mahathir to hand over power to Anwar.

I had written: "Even if it is for about two years, it is still a very long time in politics and many unexpected things may happen. The power equation (with other players who are not committed to the succession) may also change. There could also be a realignment with many MPs leaving their parties to be independents or to join other parties. It may not be entirely up to Dr Mahathir to hand over the premiership by that time. Politics is like a game of

chess where nothing can be ruled out."

Lately, there have been some juicy stories circulating and speculating what and when would be the next moves of the key political players. Which politicians or officials of the former regime would be the next to be charged for corruption, abuse of power or breaking the law in any other manner. As the law must be applied impartially to all without fear or favour, would there be any prominent personalities in PH to be charged as well?

Many of the negative stories circulating do not bode well for PH, especially for its key component member PKR, which is embroiled in an open warfare between Anwar and his powerful deputy Datuk Seri Azmin Ali. The trust between these two men, who go a long way back, seems to have evaporated with Azmin sending signals that he has lost confidence in Anwar's leadership in PKR.

Even with the best and honourable intention of Dr Mahathir to relinquish his position to Anwar later on, is it really up to Dr Mahathir on who is to succeed him?

According to Article 43 of the Federal Constitution, "the appointment of the prime minister is the prerogative of the king who shall appoint a member of parliament (MP), who in his judgment, is likely to command the confidence of the majority of the 222 MPs".

At best, when Dr Mahathir is ready to step down, like he did in 2003, he can only try to get the consensus of the ruling coalition

(PH) at that time, which may not be the same composition as of now, to nominate Anwar to the king to be appointed as prime minister. That is all Dr Mahathir can do and he should not be blamed if Anwar, for whatever reasons, cannot succeed him later on.

In 2003, Dr Mahathir was in full control of the Barisan Nasional ruling coalition, which commanded a two-third majority in Parliament. BN also unanimously supported his decision to nominate Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi to become the next prime minister. In the current highly fluid political situation with cross-overs or party hopping, departure to be independents and the possibility of certain parties breaking up, Dr Mahathir does not have that liberty anymore. Many things can happen, which may be out of his control.

The political situation is quite unpredictable due to many forces at play — lack of discipline, impatience, temptation for corruption, disregard for ethics and a host of issues such as race and religion — which unscrupulous politicians can resort to use, especially when they become desperate for power, or to avoid prosecution, which many are often in such a state of denial.

It is really a numbers game now, on who is to become the prime minister after Dr Mahathir, either via an amicable consensus in the ruling coalition or a new realignment for all MPs to decide.

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