

Leaders should learn to quit while the audience is still clapping

After losing miserably in the just concluded 15th general election (GE15), Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad announced that he was now resigned to writing. The fact that he lost his deposit in the Langkawi parliamentary contest underlines the depth of the fall in his popularity, which had enabled him to have a second shot at the premiership in 2018.

It is particularly painful as the knockout blow came from the people of Langkawi, an island Mahathir nurtured from a sleepy hollow into a prime tourist destination in Malaysia.

Considering his vast experience in the political scene, the 97-year-old should have sensed that his party, Pejuang, would fare badly. The best chance it had was in Langkawi, but even that was not to be.

The height of Mahathir's political career was in May 2018, when he made a comeback in a highly charged general election that saw Barisan Nasional lose control of Putrajaya after more than 60 years. He was appointed prime minister despite his party Bersatu having won only 13 seats.

At 93 years old then, he had the distinction of being the oldest prime minister in the world.

Under an agreement, Mahathir was to hold the post for only two years, after which he was to hand over the reins to Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim and retire from politics.

But that did not happen, and the end result was the collapse of Pakatan Harapan in the infamous Sheraton Move, to be replaced a new coalition led by Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin.

Again, instead of retiring, Mahathir went on to form Pejuang to contest in GE15. However, all its candidates including Mahathir and son Mukhriz were soundly beaten.

For all his political astuteness and worldly knowledge, Mahathir failed to master the art of retiring gracefully.

But he isn't the only one.

Another seasoned politician, 85-year-old Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, lost the

Gua Musang parliamentary seat which he has held since 1974 — making him the longest continuous member of parliament.

Razaleigh lost narrowly to a candidate from PAS and is challenging the decision of the returning officer to not allow a recount. Even if Razaleigh wins in his bid, there is no guarantee of him winning the seat.

His influence in Umno has diminished significantly in the last 25 years. Since Umno lost control of the government in 2018, Razaleigh has hit out at the party leadership and quit as adviser last year.

Razaleigh's best years were in the early 1980s when he was the powerful minister of finance and Umno vice-president but he never rose to the top job as prime minister and Umno president. He challenged Mahathir in 1987, narrowly losing by 43 votes.

Tun Musa Hitam was Razaleigh's running mate, and was gunning for the deputy president's post. Musa lost and retired from active politics.

But Razaleigh soldiered on and in 1988, he formed a splinter party called Semangat 46. It teamed up with PAS and DAP under Gagasan Rakyat, which failed to topple Barisan Nasional in the 1990 general election.

In 1996, Semangat 46 folded, and Razaleigh and his supporters returned to Umno. He continued to be active politically until the stunning defeat on Nov 19.

Among politicians, there are very few who know when to retire. Almost all do not leave at the height of their career, and those who stay out of politics completely after they quit are a rare breed.

Mahathir quit as prime minister in 2003 and handed the reins over to Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. But instead of



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allowing his successor a free hand, he became his vocal critic. It contributed to Abdullah's downfall as Umno president after a dismal performance in the 2008 general election.

Abdullah stayed out of politics after handing over the mantle to Datuk Seri Najib Razak, who is serving a 12-year jail sentence for corruption, abuse of power and money laundering.

As for Mahathir, his defeat in Langkawi was drowned out amid the political drama over the hung parliament.

Had Mahathir quit the political stage in late 2019 or early 2020 as promised, he would have earned his stripes as the person who came back from retirement to put Malaysia back on track.

But he was obsessed by the thought that he was the only person who could unite the Malays and the other races in

the country, and put the economy back on a strong footing.

It is not easy for anyone to leave at the height of their career. The decision is tough whether one is in politics, sports or the corporate world.

Bjorn Borg quit his successful career in tennis at the age of 26 after winning several Grand Slam titles. Bill Gates, one of the richest men in the world, left Microsoft when he was 59 as he wanted to devote more time to philanthropy.

But they are a rare breed. Winners never quit and quitters never win, goes the adage. That may be true. But real wisdom lies in leaving when the audience still wants more.

Leave when you are at the top — not when you are on the way down or, worse still, when you are forced out.

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