

Succeeding Mahathir

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Through two decades, the post of Malaysia's Deputy Prime Minister has been a revolving door. **BUNN NAGARA** explains why the first three men who held the post did not go the distance.

AMONG the unique features of the Mahathir administration is the series of four deputy prime ministers - an unprecedented circumstance in Malaysia, and a rare event for any country.

To understand the conditions that made for this, it is important first to understand the changing times and circumstances of Malaysia over the span of Prime Minister Mahathir's 22 years. Then, set them in the context of his unrelenting push to propel the country forward in the ways he had envisioned.

In 1981 Dr Mahathir burst on the scene as prime minister, brimming with ideas and enthusiasm to transform the country and its people.

The Mahathir government was in hand, as was Tan Sri Musa Hitam's position as Deputy Prime Minister. The age of the dynamic duo had arrived: the so-called "Two M" administration was now in place.

Musa had beaten Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah for Umno's deputy presidency, and he enjoyed Dr Mahathir's support. But by the mid-1980s an element of complacency had crept in, and Musa lost to Ghafar Baba.

Yet from the beginning, the scale of Dr Mahathir's ambitions for the country could be imagined, attempted or achieved only with the sheer force of his own personality. It was a force that often left little room for any stubbornly dissenting view.

The grand designs that were to be Malaysia's indelible stamp on the world - in various political, economic, diplomatic and other spheres - were primarily Dr Mahathir's pet projects, born of his distinct imprimatur.

The British government system bequeathed to Malaysia confers on the prime minister a commanding presence in the Cabinet, empowering him to appoint key individuals like his deputy. With Dr Mahathir's "take charge" style, it became more visibly so.

In succeeding Tun Hussein Onn who took his time with policy matters, Dr Mahathir felt enough time had already been lost in developing the country. Some of his colleagues, however, were either unaccustomed to the haste or saw other policy priorities as well.

In the headlong rush to industrialisation, privatisation and economic growth, this uncompromising approach produced differences of opinion and perspective. Over time, these differences covered policy ends and means at both party and national leadership levels.

In 1987, Tengku Razaleigh chal-



Anti-clockwise from top left: Musa, the first of the three deputies, had a brilliant start before faltering; Ghafar was underwhelming and was overtaken by the ambitious and ultimately flawed Anwar. Abdullah proves that he is the man to succeed Dr Mahathir.

lenged Dr Mahathir for the Umno presidency. Musa, already alienated by Mahathir's style, had quit and switched his allegiance to former rival Razaleigh.

The Kelantan prince lost narrowly by 43 votes (2.9% of party delegates), and proceeded to form the Semangat 46 party in opposition. Whatever the prospects of the new party, Musa's political fortunes in Mahathir's Umno were over.

When Tun Ghafar Baba became Mahathir's second deputy in 1986, he had all the qualities of a loyal number two: steadfastness, predictability and a plodding sturdiness drawn from his grassroots strength.

Critics complained that they were underwhelmed by Ghafar's lack of presence. But they failed to appreciate how this marked a welcome change in a deputy premier, coming after Musa's relatively vivid individuality.

Ghafar was an "old school" man of the people, one attuned to the Malay ground whence he had sprung. His humility and simplicity

gave Umno a certain candour and human quality, if not exactly colour or drama.

But Ghafar's down-to-earth quality also prompted designs on his deputy premiership as prospective party president and eventual prime minister. At least, it encouraged talk of Ghafar being just a seat warmer for someone more overtly ambitious: Umno vice-president Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

In 1993, speculation about a challenge to Ghafar's Umno deputy presidency grew and spread. Dr Mahathir said there should be no such challenge, as did Anwar himself.

But Anwar's supporters in Umno persisted, pushing for him to run. Then Anwar seemed to relent, as his earlier no-contest call visibly waned, and he now said he decided to run only because the people wanted him to.

From then on, the floodgates were flung open and the Anwar political machine was in full flight.

Among party divisions, Anwar supporters beat Ghafar's 145-7. To avoid the embarrassment of a crushing blow at party elections, Ghafar withdrew his candidacy, handing Anwar's campaign the Umno deputy presidency by default.

For Anwar, this was just the latest phase in a continuous ascendancy in political fortunes. Soon, there was talk of whether or when Anwar would "make a move" to challenge Dr Mahathir for the top post of Umno president, and with it the prize of the premiership.

One view held that Anwar would

not be so foolish, particularly after witnessing first-hand the political undoing of Musa upon opting to play the contrarian. Besides, Dr Mahathir was the mentor and Anwar the handpicked successor, and in a stable and prosperous Malaysia it was unlikely for a palace coup to be in the wings.

Moreover, Dr Mahathir had to face down opposition from party colleagues for advancing Anwar's political career, after persuading him to join Umno in 1982. And it was said to be against Malay culture for Anwar the beneficiary to betray his benefactor.

Nonetheless the talk of a party coup persisted, aided by Anwar's barely disguised ambitions and a perceptibly even more ambitious inner circle. This obliged both Dr Mahathir and Anwar to talk openly of their mutual respect and camaraderie, only making cynics even more convinced that a rift was brewing.

Then in 1997, the Asian financial and economic crisis erupted. The tectonic movements caused the ground under Umno to shift and part, and the party leadership was not spared.

Differences between Dr Mahathir and Anwar spilled into public view, particularly when the latter's foot soldiers led the charge against Dr Mahathir's leadership at the 1998 party assembly. They were beaten back and by September Anwar was removed from both the government and party.

For the following four months, the post of Deputy Prime Minister

remained vacant. Then in January 1999, egged on by colleagues that the country needed the stabilising factor of a named deputy premier, Mahathir appointed Umno vice-president Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi (Pak Lah) to the post.

In the Cabinet, Pak Lah also moved from the Foreign Ministry to the important Home Ministry portfolio. His style is acknowledged to be different from Dr Mahathir's but as the Prime Minister put it, "that's all right."

Unlike Dr Mahathir who is a trained physician, Pak Lah's career began in the civil service. That should make him a manager or administrator rather than a fixer or visionary - and he has confirmed that existing policies will be maintained.

Pak Lah's family and educational background in Islamic studies should stand him in good stead in facing challenges from an Islamist opposition. His constituency in Penang is likewise weighted against any prospective Anwarist challenge from the same home state.

When asked, Pak Lah said simply that he would like to be the last deputy prime minister in Dr Mahathir's Cabinet. Despite vacating the Cabinet in 1987 for associating with dissidents like Musa, Pak Lah has managed affairs well enough to see that wish come true.

Dr Mahathir once suggested that if he had too many ex-deputies, people might begin to think that the fault was his rather than theirs. There is, however, another way of looking at the unprecedented four DPMS - Mahathir's own political longevity as prime minister.

Mahathir's four deputies each averaged five-and-a-half years in that post. The previous three (under the preceding prime ministers) each averaged seven - not too much different, despite Tun Razak's unusually long deputyship of 13 years.

Veteran opposition leader Lim Kit Siang reportedly said that apart from everything else, Dr Mahathir is a remarkable leader in having survived so long. Thus far, being Malaysian Prime Minister also means being President of Umno, whose leadership structure prompted *Asiaweek* magazine to describe it as "the most democratic party in the world."

The political longevity of Prime Minister Mahathir has produced a string of deputy premiers precisely because of its duration. If there is unlikely to be as many as four deputy premiers in any single future administration, it is probably because it is equally unlikely to have another prime minister elected and re-elected for more than two decades.