

# Exit like a statesman

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Comment by **Zainon Ahmad**

WHEN THE tears have dried up and the disappointment and anger have subsided, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad should console himself with the thought that it was love that killed his bid to cry to the Umno general assembly this November.

He should be grateful that in the twilight years of his life and three years after he relinquished power to a successor of his choice, he is still so much loved by party members that they refused to allow him to make a spectacle of himself at the assembly.

And what more consoling is the knowledge that among those who want him to attend but only as a dignified and respected guest and a VVIP are International Trade and Industry Minister Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz and Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Seri Nazri Aziz.

Rafidah has been the target of his criticisms and scorn over the AP issue while Nazri had thrown back on behalf of prime minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi the barbs Mahathir intended for his successor while the latter was maintaining his "elegant silence."

A scene at a gathering in a house in Kubang Pasu on Thursday evening saw a speaker saying: "As he had been our respected division and national leader and benefactor for two decades, do we want to allow him in his old age - when he is probably incapable of making the right decision anymore - to become a delegate and to suffer all manner of indignities? We must protect him and shield him."

Indeed that had been the role adopted by some newspaper editors occasionally in the days when he was the prime minister: to protect Mahathir from his own excessive vehemence and to make Mahathir

look good. But the party voters of Kubang Pasu - his own ward where many of his old friends from his pre-war Pekan Rabu days live and where he had showered them with all manner of lavishness and attention - were persuaded to the thinking that they must protect him.

But to Mahathir, a veteran practitioner of the Machiavellian art, this argument do not wash. He had been too much of a politician to accept anything other than what happened in Kubang Pasu as realpolitik.

To him the grim reality is that he had made his bid to be elected a

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delegate and had lost. He must be chagrined to know that he was defeated by the very Umno patronage system that he himself had helped to nurture and perfected during his 22 years as leader of the party - a party he re-created in his own image in 1987.

Mahathir had, thus, been stopped in his tracks in his bid to embarrass the party leadership by sitting - he, being a prime minister and party president for more than two decades - among the ordinary delegates.

For certain, had he won, he would never fail to get the attention of the delegates everytime he walked up or down the aisle as he make his way to his seat or making an exit out of the hall. Ah, they are up there, so grand, while we are here listening to all their spin.

That is enough even if he failed to get the chance to speak. If he gets the

opportunity to speak - and he will certainly try to grab it - it is a bonus as more will be able to hear what he has been saying all this while and, who knows, even more.

And this is what many in Umno and outside fear. Ever since he came out to speak openly against the administration of Abdullah the unity of the party has been somewhat shaken. But by attending the assembly as a delegate he would only deepen the split further and embarrass Abdullah. Already there is concern among businesses and investors who are quite rattled by the row and are afraid that they are in for a period of political instability.

So it must have been a huge relief to many people - in as well outside of the party - after it was announced shortly after 5pm on Saturday that Mahathir did not win the ticket.

It is interesting to speculate whether in his single-mindedness to be a delegate to the assembly he ever considered the possibility of being booed should he rise to speak unbidden and the pandemonium that would break should those who supports him hoo-back.

Wonder whether it also crossed his mind that could very well happen and he would go down in history as the man who had caused the normally orderly Umno assembly to descend into chaos and violence.

But all that concern seem unfounded now. By not being a delegate on Saturday he will never be a source of embarrassment to the leaders of the party and the assembly this November. Better still for everyone concerned if he did not attend at all - even as a guest.

Like Harold Macmillan said when resigning his seat in the House of Commons a year after stepping down as British prime minister:

"When the curtain falls, the best thing an actor can do is to go away."