

High expectations, huge letdown

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NEVER say never. Nothing is impossible. There are no permanent friends or permanent enemies in politics.

Throw all these clichés into the pot of hope, and what you get are bloated expectations; what you are setting yourself up for is a colossal letdown.

That is the feeling that greeted some Malaysians on Monday, the day after Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi met his chief critic, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, for a two-hour peace talk in Seri Perdana.

They hoped that the meeting between the PM and the former PM would have a happy ending — that it would end months of attacks by Dr Mahathir against the current administration. They wished that the one-on-one discussion would lead to a rapprochement between two of the country's most admired politicians.

Well, it didn't.

Dr Mahathir spoke with candour behind closed doors and repeated his laundry list of complaints against Abdullah during two meetings with reporters. Some news agencies reported that he seemed to have upped the ante following the peace talks.

Yesterday, he told reporters that he had no intention of dropping his campaign against the administration, despite the landmark talks with Abdullah.

"I will continue until there is some change, until I achieve some results," he said.

Disappointed. Sad. Upset. Don't be.

The fact is it was unrealistic to expect Dr Mahathir to stop his campaign against Abdullah. He has spent more than six months working up the ground and making serious

COMMENT

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allegations against the PM, alternating between accusing him of reversing his policies and handing over the reins of government to his family. He has invested a lot of his political capital and goodwill in playing the role of national saviour. It would have been unnatural for him to stop his attacks just because he spent two hours unloading all his grievances.

It is pretty much the same with Abdullah. He has defended the decision of the Cabinet to scrap the half-bridge to Singapore; has contested allegations of nepotism; has defended his right to govern the country in his way and has gone on national television to answer the clutch of accusations against him.

All along, he has invested his considerable goodwill and election mandate in arguing that he is guiding the country along the correct path of balanced development. So it would be unrealistic to expect him to wave the white flag and submit to Dr Mahathir's litany of complaints.

So why did they meet? If there was little chance of common ground, why did both men sit down and talk? Because this is what the ground wanted. For many Malaysians, this has been an uneasy few months — watching two respected leaders slugging it out in public. For many Malaysians, it has been a difficult time — having to choose sides.

They believed that if the two men

got together without the hissing from the sidelines, problems could be solved. Ignoring ground sentiment to try and find some settlement would have been dangerous for them — it would have painted them as unreasonable and arrogant.

So was this meeting a waste of time? No. Sitting down face-to-face and thrashing out problems helps keep the channel of communications open. Perhaps Sunday's meeting may pave the way for future discussions to repair the damaged relations between the two.

So what can Malaysians take away from Sunday's meeting? A couple of things.

One, Abdullah is not in denial. When he said that his popularity had also taken a beating from this spat with Dr Mahathir, he was being honest. He knows that a continuing war of words will only serve to keep Barisan Nasional distracted.

The PM also knows that his chief task for the next few months is not to get bogged down in a political sideshow but to focus on making sure that there is more economic activity on the ground. This country has been raised on a diet of an expanding economic pie. Anything else and the ruling coalition will be punished, as it was in 1986 and 1999 when Dr Mahathir was the PM.

Two, Dr Mahathir only believes in his way. He believes his legacy is being chipped away by actions of the government. And he will carry on attacking, especially now that he has satisfied public opinion by meeting the PM.

"People say that I have been making comments from the outside, but now I have seen him," he said on Sunday. Less than 24 hours later, he expanded his attack on Abdullah.