

The Abdullah-Dr M Meeting

The meeting between former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi is finally over.

While Dr Mahathir has voiced his views,
it will be good if Abdullah makes public his response.

ON THE DAY THAT TUN DR MAHATHIR MOHAMAD TOLD THE PRESS THAT he was ready to meet Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, a key member of the association of former Umno members of Parliament and State Assemblymen (Mubarak), Datuk Othman Abdul, sent me an e-mail.

That was on Oct 17. In it, he outlined details of the negotiations to bring together Abdullah and Dr Mahathir. He ended the e-mail by requesting me not to reveal it until such a time that details of the meeting had been finalised.

But on Oct 18, when I telephoned him to seek his permission to reveal some of the more pertinent points concerning Mubarak's peace efforts for my blog (The Scribe A Kadir Jasin), he sounded enthusiastic.

Upon deeper probing, he acknowledged it was not going to be smooth sailing. He said he and a handful of other former Umno MPs and State Assemblymen felt they were duty bound to make the attempt.

As I stated in my blog dated Oct 18, it took the loosely constituted Mubarak a month to finalise the meeting. A brief rundown of its plan is essential in our attempt to understand the outcome of the two-hour meeting that eventually took place between the two men on Oct 22 at Sri Perdana in Putrajaya.

The following were key elements of the Mubarak mediation plan:-

- * The effort to bring Abdullah and Dr Mahathir to the negotiating table started about a month before the meeting finally took place;

- * Mubarak members who were involved in the peace plan were Tan Sri Zaleha Ismail (former Minister in the Mahathir Cabinet), Datuk Abu Zahar Ujang (former MP for Kuala Pilah in Negeri Sembilan who is also acting chairman of the association) and Datuk Othman Abdul (former MP for Pendang in Kedah);

- * Also involved at various points of the plan were Datuk Seri Radzi Sheikh Ahmad, the Umno Secretary-General, Tan Sri Khalid

Abdullah (former Kedah State Executive Councillor and former Chairman of Utusan Melayu Bhd) and Datuk Mokhzani Mahathir, Dr Mahathir's son;

- * In the beginning, two Mubarak proposals which were agreed to by Radzi were to invite Dr Mahathir to address members of the Umno Supreme Council and also to speak to Umno/Malay Cabinet Ministers;

- * Dr Mahathir agreed to both proposals and suggested that Mubarak should also arrange for him to meet the Prime Minister, accompanied by a 'trustworthy witness';

- * Radzi informed the Prime Minister of Dr Mahathir's request. Abdullah agreed to meet his former boss but in a four-eyed meeting;

- * Mubarak met Dr Mahathir on Oct 2 to inform him of the Prime Minister's willingness to attend a four-eyed meeting with him. Dr Mahathir was reluctant to meet Abdullah alone, but after more than an hour of pleading by Mubarak, he relented. According to Othman, Dr Mahathir said he was accepting the no-witness meeting 'for the sake of the Malays and Umno'.

- * Dr Mahathir told the Mubarak delegation that he was ready to meet Abdullah anywhere and at anytime convenient to the Prime Minister 'because he (Abdullah) was the busy one'.

- * On the same day (Oct 2), Mubarak met the Prime Minister to inform him of Dr Mahathir's stand. The Prime Minister, according to Othman, was visibly pleased; and

- * Radzi later told Mubarak that the Prime Minister would himself arrange for the meeting with Dr Mahathir. Mubarak was later informed that before leaving for Mecca to perform the Umrah, Abdullah had contacted Mokhzani to ask him to arrange the date for the meeting after Oct 16.

Abdullah's clear response needed

From the sequence of events, it was clear that the meeting was

initiated by Mubarak and that there was more than one proposal that had been agreed upon.

So far only one has materialised, that is the four-eyed meeting between Abdullah and Dr Mahathir.

But with the outcome of the Oct 22 meeting being anything but conclusive, it is unlikely that the other two proposals – Dr Mahathir addressing the Umno Supreme Council and a meeting with the Umno/Malay members of the Cabinet – will see daylight.

Appearing from the meeting, Dr Mahathir told reporters that he would continue to criticise the Government as and when it is necessary.

The Prime Minister, on his part, has only partially broken his 'elegant silence' – a term that is the brainwave of former Deputy Prime Minister Tun Musa Hitam – to answer Dr Mahathir's charges. I am forced to conclude that nothing much by way of reconciliation has taken place.

On the contrary, it might have reinforced the differences between the two men.

From the tone of Dr Mahathir's impromptu Press conference at his house minutes after meeting Abdullah, it was clear that they were speaking in different political languages. Or as many observers have since been saying, Dr Mahathir did the talking and Abdullah did the listening.

The Prime Minister, on Oct 26, had pleaded for more time to respond fully to Dr Mahathir's charges.

Reading the transcript of Dr Mahathir's interview published by The Star, I have a feeling that the Prime Minister was overly concerned with the issue of popularity instead of addressing Dr Mahathir's grouses.

According to Dr Mahathir, Abdullah told him that the both of them had become unpopular as a result of his (Dr Mahathir's) criticism of the Government.

In what is clearly an attempt to politicise the issue and to make Dr Mahathir look like a traitor to Umno, Abdullah told him that the people benefiting from their differences are the leaders of the opposition such as former Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim and Kelantan Menteri Besar and Pas religious head, Datuk Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat.

Understandably, Abdullah has not much choice but to politicise his differences with Dr Mahathir because this is about the only viable option in the war of words with his former boss.

Abdullah is unlikely to change his mind on the substantive issues that sparked off Dr Mahathir's attack in the first place.

He is unlikely to reinstate the Mahathir era projects he cancelled, in particular the construction of the new bridge on the Malaysian side of the Causeway, and do away with the

people who are accused by Dr Mahathir of 'hijacking' Umno, the Government and the mass media.

Unfortunately for Abdullah, his assessment that Dr Mahathir's criticism of the Government is costing them their popularity and are benefiting the opposition could very well be true.

For a Prime Minister and party leader who likes to remind us that he won the biggest electoral mandate in the history of the country and whose image building is the preoccupation of the mainstream media, losing popularity is the last thing he can afford.

On the other hand, Dr Mahathir has nothing to lose. This is one man who thrives on controversy. He cares not about popularity but on winning the battle.

Politically, Dr Mahathir is nothing. He gave it up in favour of Abdullah three years ago this month. He not only made Abdullah his successor, he also pressured Umno to confirm him as President. He sidestepped his protégé, Datuk Seri Mohd Najib Abdul Razak. He was taken up by Abdullah's Islamic credentials.

In the last year or so, Abdullah's controlled media and party apparatus have but turned Dr Mahathir into a *pariah* and terms like traitor, power crazy and post-prime ministerial

syndrome are being liberally used to describe him.

The danger is not about Dr Mahathir leading a rebellion against Umno or the Government. He has no capacity to do that. He has been effectively shut out of Umno and the mainstream media. Very few people dare to be associated with him.

The danger lies in the people sharing his stance and his points of view. With the economy still struggling to show a clear direction and the prices of goods and services rising, Dr Mahathir's criticism of Abdullah may find willing listeners.

For the sake of transparency, accountability and openness, which incidentally are the mantras of the Abdullah Administration, the public has the right to know what the Prime Minister feels about the meeting.

At some point of time, he has to speak up. He has to defend his position. He cannot continue to depend on his supporters and his media operators to demonise Dr Mahathir.

There is only so much these people can do to protect him. In fact, the public's anger and distaste for these known apple polishers may harm Abdullah's interest. In the meantime, we say, *que sera sera*, whatever will be will be. The future's not ours to see.

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OF BUMIPUTERA EQUITY OWNERSHIP AND THE TRUTH

WOULD it not be nicer if the political leadership of the country could acknowledge that the Bumiputeras own 45% of the country's corporate wealth instead of denying it?

That, in fact, should have been the case had the New Economic Policy's objective of restructuring Malaysian society been successful. The Bumiputeras would by now be controlling at least 30% of the corporate wealth.

Had that happened, we would not be at pains trying to debunk some obscure claim that the Bumiputeras now own 45% of the country's corporate wealth. We would probably be asking why the Bumiputeras own only 45% instead of 50 or 55%? And why not? After all, the Bumiputeras account for more than 60% of the population.

It is for this reason that I argued in this column some time ago that the decision to stick to the 30% Bumiputera ownership and delay its attainment to 2020 was flawed.

The Bumiputeras are entitled to more than 30% of the country's corporate wealth. The 30% target was set in 1970 and is, for all intents and purposes, out of date. The population of Bumiputeras is rising, as is the level of poverty among them.

Having Bumiputeras, who account for more than 60% of the population, controlling 18, 30 or 45% of the nation's corporate wealth cannot, in absolute terms, be fair.

Can we imagine the white Americans owning less of America's corporate wealth than the Blacks, Hispanics and Asians? Or can we imagine Singaporean Malays and Indians owning more than the Singaporean Chinese?

If we accept that wealth held by government-linked companies (GLCs) and agencies belong to Bumiputeras, then the best way to settle the issue is to transfer every single sen of their assets (wealth) to a Bumiputera trust agency or agencies.

That will also solve the problem of GLCs competing with Bumiputera entrepreneurs. The situation is actually pretty grim. There are GLCs that compete with Bumiputeras for meagre projects.

I personally have come across a subsidiary of a large GLC out-bidding small Bumiputera contractors for a cleaning service contract worth less than RM7,000 a month.

Since the Umno-led Barisan Nasional (BN) Government, as the Prime Minister loves to say, has a massive mandate, it should have no problem legislating a credible entity, say Permodalan Nasional Bhd (PNB), to be the sole trustee of Bumiputera corporate assets.

If it is generally agreed that GLCs' assets belong to Bumiputeras as opposed to all Malaysians, then there should be no problem transferring their ultimate ownership to PNB.

On my part, I have always thought that GLCs and other government economic entities belonged to all Malaysians and hence their assets cannot be considered Bumiputeras'.

If this is acceptable to all Malaysians, then it should be done.

Once we get over this tricky issue, we can devote our entire attention to the more urgent matter of eradicating poverty.

In fact, the latter task will be easier to achieve should the Bumiputeras have a much larger share of the nation's corporate wealth. Depending on how PNB goes about redistributing the wealth, Bumiputera poverty might be erased overnight.

That being the case, I agree totally with the call for the government to encourage public debate instead of issuing gag orders or dissuading the people from questioning government policies.

More so when some BN politicians themselves think that Najib should not have tried to stop further discussions on the Economic Planning Unit's calculation of Bumiputera equity ownership or reminding the public that even an intellectual discourse could result in discord.

I think Bumiputeras are entitled to more than 30% or 45% of the corporate wealth of the country. Surely, a liberal BN politician and lawyer like the Kota Baru Member of Parliament, Datuk Zaid Ibrahim, agrees that justice is not served when the majority owns less than the minority.

So, if there is a speedier way of achieving this objective, like transferring government

assets to a Bumiputera trust agency, provided that they are agreed upon democratically, then the issue should continue to be debated.

PNB can in turn utilise these assets to launch more unit trust funds that can be sold to all Malaysians, with preference to the Bumiputeras. After all, there are already PNB unit trusts that are sold to non-Bumiputeras. **mb**

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