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Initiators, Inheritors, Innovators

By Ooi Kee Beng

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THERE are leaders who are followed for their agenda or vision, and who succeed in creating an institution that outlasts them.

These are the initiators.

Then there are leaders who follow and propound the agenda or vision of the institution whose top position they have occupied.

These are the inheritors.

And thirdly, there are leaders who manage to alter — even radically — the agenda and vision of the institution that they lead.

These are the innovators.

In the case of Malaysia's United Malays National Organisation (Umno), one may say that the first president of the party, Mr Onn Ja'afar, falls in the first category.

He founded the party in May 1946. However, in August 1951, when he tried to open the party to non-Malays — his reasons for wanting this are still hotly-contested — party members wouldnot go along with it, and he had to resign.

His attempt at reforming the institution he founded five years earlier — in other words, at being the third type of leader — failed.

We see him moving on to becoming an initiator again. He immediately founded the multiracial Independence of Malaya Party (IMP). But after losing elections to the Umno-led Alliance coalition, he dissolved the party in 1953 and created a third party, Parti Negara. This third party fell apart following his death in 1962.

The second Umno president, Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra, was a much more flexible character who, despite becoming the leader of a Malay ethnocentric party in 1951, ended up heading a multiracial coalition of race-based parties. As an innovator, he seemed a success in many ways.

However, the riots of May 13, 1969 caught him by surprise. Having lost credibility as a result, he played a minor role until his retirement in September 1970, and the leadership of the country was inherited by his deputy, Mr Abdul Razak Hussein.

We now know that by the end of 1969, the Premier-in-waiting had already learned that he was terminally ill. This knowledge could not but have influenced many of his policies in the early '70s.

His time in power, a time of considerable innovation, is best understood if divided into two parts. From May 1969 until August 1973, he received invaluable help and support from his deputy, Home Affairs Minister Ismail Abdul Rahman. Indeed, that regime is often referred to as the Razak-Ismail administration.

Mr Ismail would jump in as Acting Prime Minister whenever Mr Razak was out of the country, something he had done in the '60s when the Tunku and Mr Razak were not around.

The trusted Mr Ismail, who was suffering from ill health as well, was the only person in the government who knew of Mr Razak's illness. Together, the two men forged many policies between 1969 and 1973 in great haste. They feared they would not get to finish what they had set out to do, which was to return Malaysia to parliamentary rule as soon as possible, and to remedy socio-economic conditions so that racial riots would not occur again.

However, it was Mr Ismail, the supposed successor, and not Mr Razak, who died first, falling victim to a heart attack on Aug 2, 1973. Mr Razak stayed alive for another two-and-a-half years, with his brother-in-law, Hussein, the son of Mr Onn Ja'afar, as his deputy.

The difference in quality of the innovations carried out by the robust and visionary Razak-Ismail administration on the one hand, and its inheritor, the Razak-Hussein administration on the other, is still in need of proper study.

Mr Hussein Onn was a well-trained lawyer but whose position within Umno was not very well-grounded. On taking over from Mr Razak in January 1976, he tried to govern as systematically as possible, keeping to due process as much as he could. He was in many ways more an inheritor than an innovator.

Next, we have Mr Mahathir Mohamed. After becoming Prime Minister in 1981, this inheritor quickly set about changing the modernisation direction of the country in radical ways.

He was without question an innovator par excellence. This was shown to good effect when Umno was declared illegal in 1988 following internal struggles. Former Premiers Tunku Abdul Rahman and Hussein Onn came forth and initiated a new

party, Umno Malaysia. In response, Mr Mahathir initiated the Umno Baru. His party won in the competition between the two, no doubt aided by the fact that he was the incumbent Prime Minister.

After 22 years of more innovation than the country could take, Mr Mahathir resigned in October 2003. Mr Abdullah Badawi was chosen ahead of Najib, son of former Premier Razak, to inherit the party presidency.

Much hope was placed by voters in the new Premier being as much of an innovator as he claimed he was. However, most of his intended reforms were not carried out, and he paid badly for it at the polls earlier this year. Mr Abdullah is now scheduled to hand over power in March next year to Mr Najib.

What is of interest to Malaysians during this transitional period is what type of leader the Premier-in-waiting will be. Will he act as a mere inheritor and preserve whatever he can of his inheritance, or will he be the radical innovator that Mr Abdullah failed to be?

No doubt, Malaysia's newly-empowered voters will give us the verdict sooner or later.

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