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## When a strongman leaves...

By Ooi Kee Beng

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*“The country needs healthy institutions,  
not a new strongman, to restore  
trust in the government”*

IT IS not uncommon for countries that appeared after the fall of colonialism, and which started out with democratic ideals embedded in their Constitutions, to nevertheless evolve successively towards an authoritarian style of government and nation-building.

In Malaysia's case, this process culminated in the 22-year-long period under Dr Mahathir Mohamad (picture). There was, therefore, great optimism and even greater relief in the air when this “strongman” figure, perhaps to his everlasting credit, actually retired in October 2003. Such politicians tend to stay in power until they expire.

It was thus at such a historical point in history that Mr Abdullah Badawi stepped onto centre stage, and became the country's fifth Prime Minister. The hopes of Malaysian society at that time were so high, and so desperate, that the only leader who could take full advantage of the social dynamics released by Dr Mahathir's retirement was one who promised far-reaching reforms.

There was no room for more “strongman politics”, only room for the rectification of the damage done by the foregoing authoritarianism. Despite the same party and the same coalition remaining in power, Dr Mahathir's successor had to be one who was responsive to the citizens demands, and who realised that the alternative to Mahathirism was healthy institutions.

Mr Abdullah knew this well enough to make all the right moves in the first months of his mandate. Calling on Malaysians “to work with me”, he stopped mega-projects, began cutting down on the budget deficit, started corruption proceedings against certain individuals and founded institutions to promote “integrity”.

As a result, Mr Abdullah enjoyed the highest level of popularity in Malaysian history in 2004 and his critics kept silent, purportedly to give him a chance to show his worth. The only way for Dr Mahathir's successor to retain legitimacy was to live up to the expectations that Mr Abdullah himself had formulated.

But in the long run, he failed to deliver. In dismal disappointment, voters decided to punish him, his party and the ruling coalition during the March 8 general elections.

Cautious comparisons to the fate of other polities may be useful. Taiwan comes to mind. Mr Chiang Ching-kuo, who governed the island for over a decade after his father Chiang Kai-shek died in 1976, decided in 1987 to dismantle the tottering system that the Kuomintang had harshly put in place in 1949. The island left authoritarianism behind and became a democracy, leading subsequently to loss of power by the dominant party.

This is one success story where the successor to a strongman politician finally realises the historical limitations of the system and the party, and "executes a *coup d'etat* on himself", as it were, and allows a more dynamic system to take its place, even to the transitional detriment of the party itself. A good example of a failed succession to a strongman politician is Yugoslavia, where Marshall Josip Broz Tito was in power from 1945 to 1980. After his death in 1980, increasing ethnic rivalry and struggles for power in the region led finally to genocide and to the bloody break-up of the republic into several smaller states.

In Malaysia's case, the historical role of Premier Abdullah was the difficult one of honestly realising the untenability of the system, and of healing the institutions whose integrity had been badly undermined during the Mahathir years. He had to execute a *coup d'etat* on himself, as it were.

This he failed to do, largely because that would have meant him allowing changes that would have been transitionally detrimental to the dominant party, the United Malays National Organisation (Umno).

Mr Abdullah had not been rebuilding institutions quickly enough or seriously enough and at the same time, he was certainly not a strongman either. Not knowing what to make of this lack of direction, voters overcame their normal fear of radical change and attempted to kick his administration out. The situation after March 8 is a much more complicated one. What Mr Abdullah had failed to do, others will now try to do in their own way. And because Umno would not allow the required changes, it is now being forced to transform itself.

Mr Abdullah's second mandate is therefore essentially different from his first. Umno's dominance is basically broken; the coalition that had exhibited such hubris before the elections is now in disarray and riddled with distrust; and state level politics is now pluralistic and competitive in nature. What the federal government failed to do, the state governments under opposition parties are now committed to doing. The political contentions from now on will be about what institutions should be built or rebuilt, and the order in which this should happen.

On that front, the weakness of the alternative coalition — the Pakatan Rakyat — lies in the potential conflict between the Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS) that wants a more Islamist society and the Democratic Action Party (DAP) that champions secularism. Mr Anwar Ibrahim's Parti Keadilan Rakyat risks being caught in the middle.

Mr Abdullah and Umno's weakness is basically their inability to change, especially while under challenge. The many years in dominance has stiffened them, there is too much face to be lost and new ways of thought have yet to permeate the party. The wind is blowing against him and the party and the fear is that, whatever policies they may think up from here on are done for the sake of their staying in power and not for the sake of the future strength and stability of the country.

**The writer is a Fellow at the Institute of South-east Asian Studies. He is the author of *Lost in Transition: Malaysia under Abdullah* (SIRD and ISEAS 2008).**