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Out with the old...

Can Najib Razak transform Malaysia's and Umno's fortunes?

By Ooi Kee Beng

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THROUGHOUT the latter half of Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi's period in power, the issue of leadership had been heatedly discussed. The general consensus seemed to be that he was a nice man, but one who had waded in way beyond his depth.

Now, as he prepares to leave the stage, the focus moves to the premier-in-waiting, Mr Najib Abdul Razak, and many worry about what type of leadership this aristocrat will provide.

What differentiates these two from Malaysia's earlier four prime ministers is that they are too young to be among those fired up by the wish to end colonialism, and consumed by the idea of national independence.

They belong to another generation in the nation-building process, and are the grateful inheritors of the apparatus that the first generation of leaders put into place.

Their climb to power started half-way up the ladder. This is a common enough phenomenon in the life of nations. The second or third generation cannot be expected to be as tough, hungry or desperate as the first was.

Mr Najib has denied that he will be returning to the authoritarian style of the fourth premier, Dr Mahathir Mohamed. At the same time, despite having been Mr Abdullah's deputy for almost five years, he cannot merely adopt his predecessor's slow-burning and ineffectual style of system-tweaking reform.

It is often claimed that a country gets the type of leader it deserves. But of course, the issue is much more complicated than that.

What type of leader arises or is needed at any particular time depends on what needs doing, and on the type of interaction the leader manages to build with those he intends to lead, or represent.

It is this relationship that decides the fate of a nation — the adaptability of those who rise to become its leaders, the challenges that are most pressing for the times, and the ease – or lack of ease — with which followers comply.

It is a truism that with very few exceptions, all societies put into place a mechanism that holds good promise of picking talents as future leaders and preparing them to perpetuate the system.

This role of generating leadership material may be undertaken by a wide variety of institutions such as business schools, the school system in general, as well as universities and colleges – even foreign ones – and also political parties, among others.

The United States has its Ivy League colleges, the French have the École Normale Supérieure and the Institut Européen d'Administration des Affaires (Insead), the British have Oxbridge, Eton and the London School of Economics, and others.

Highly politicised countries tend to generate leaders through their major political parties. This can be done either through the internal education (or indoctrination) of promising members or in conjunction with some elaborate screening process in the nation's school system.

In the case of Malaysia, the dominance that the United Malays National Organisation (Umno) and its allies in the Barisan Nasional have exercised over the country since 1957 has meant that anyone wishing to become a future leader has had to be part of this machinery.

Seldom is anyone brought in from the outside to be placed in a prominent position. One exception was of course Mr Anwar Ibrahim, whom Dr Mahathir brought in from outside Umno to reverse the party's loss of Muslim support. The leadership material that Umno possessed up to that point was then slowly eradicated, leaving only Dr Mahathir and Mr Anwar in the end.

Dr Mahathir, being the first non-aristocrat to become prime minister, was a self-made leader who rose to power by firing up the imagination of the Malay community.

Mr Anwar was also a self-made leader who excelled at exciting the crowd with his rhetoric, and at organising mass movements.

Once Mr Anwar was pushed out in 1998, and once Dr Mahathir had resigned in 2003, Malaysia entered a new period of leadership.

The country awaited a new type of leader to reform the system and to secure good governance after the excesses of the Mahathir period.

Not only are these men and women, whose convictions were forged in the fight

against colonialism gone, the citizenry has become more sophisticated. Malaysians are now more educated, more widely-read, more self-assured, more global in their outlook, and less prone to swallow propaganda wholesale.

The challenges of the times have gone beyond the mere avoidance of inter-ethnic violence and the mere improvement of material standards. Politics of division based on ethnicity and religion no longer has the powerful effect that it used to have.

Such an electorate wishes for a new type of leader and a new type of politics.

It was clear from the electoral successes he achieved in March 2004 that Mr Abdullah had promised exactly the right things to the public. But he let the moment slip, and having failed to reform and repair the system, he fell from grace in March — in the eyes of the electorate and of his party.

Few observers believe that Mr Najib is up to the job that Mr Abdullah failed to carry out, and after suffering the failure of the Abdullah period, there is little wish among voters for another such disappointment.

That is Mr Najib's big challenge. He has to win popular support as quickly as possible because he is faced with a disillusioned and impatient electorate.

His allies are insecure, at his heels snaps an opposition led by a wounded but nevertheless formidable leader in Mr Anwar Ibrahim.

The crisis of leadership that a Malaysia governed by an uninspired Umno-led Barisan Nasional is suffering today is evidenced by the present show of strength from the sultans, the pre-Umno traditional Malay leaders. Where a modern democracy is concerned, only when a power vacuum exists do monarchs get a chance — or feel called upon — to provide moral leadership.

The writer is a Fellow at the Institute of South-east Asian Studies. His latest book is March 8: Eclipsing May 13 (with Johan Saravanamuttu and Lee Hock Guan, ISEAS).