

Crisis that tested the nation's resilience

By FONG CHEE KEONG

WHEN Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad stood up to table the Constitution (Amendment) Bill 1983 for the second reading in the Dewan Rakyat on the afternoon of Aug. 1, even he probably did not know that it was to start off the single most challenging period in his tenure as Prime Minister.

There was no indication of the furore that would later erupt over the amendments. Almost everybody else thought that doubting minds would surely have been placated by his assurance that "the spirit and principles enshrined in the Constitution have not been jeopardised by these proposed amendments."

Two days later, the Bill was passed despite a perfunctory attempt by opposition leader Mr Lim Kit Siang to block its passage by introducing a motion that the Bill be referred to the House special select committee before approval was granted. His motion was rejected by the House.

The divisional voting after Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir had wound up the debate showed 136 in favour — well over the two-third majority to carry the Bill — and nine against. The lone dissenting voice belonged to the DAP.

The House adjourned *sine die* on Aug. 5.

22, the Kuala Kedah Umno division unanimously decided to ask the party's supreme council to expel or suspend former party secretary-general Datuk Senu Abdul Rahman.

He was alleged to have breached party discipline when he wrote an open letter to the Prime Minister questioning some of the amendments and the integrity of some party leaders.

This sparked off a spate of divisional meetings, a great many declarations of confidence in the Government and full backing for the amendments. It culminated in Umno Youth adopting a resolution supporting the amendments.

Wanita Umno followed suit. Gerakan too.

But by now the issue had snowballed. It was enough to prick the Government into mobilising an extensive information campaign to allay fears and to defuse the potential threat posed by rumour-mongering.

Normally drab functions, such as the opening of civic courses, took on a greater significance. They were thoroughly covered by the Press which itself had embarked on a special assignment.

Bernama, the national news agency, released a special series of articles on the Constitution. It was carried in most newspapers.

On Dec. 1 and for the first time in history, the Prime Minister told an almost full House that his Government was fighting hard to stave off a crisis over the amendments to the Constitution.

His speech, although brief, managed to defuse the tension. Until then, uncertainty had reigned. Rumours that he would resign started doing their rounds. All this was reflected in the usually sensitive stock market.

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir embarked on his next step.

A series of mammoth public rallies was organised throughout the country. People by the thousands turned out to hear their leader say that he was not power crazy or bent on making the country a republic.

Momentum gathered and the Prime Minister hardened his stand. After an Umno supreme council meeting on Dec. 3, he told reporters that the Government was willing to compromise but would not concede basic principles governing parliamentary democracy and constitutional monarchy. Here, there was to be no bargaining.

Last Sunday, several Rulers held preliminary talks in Kuala Lumpur to consider the compromise formula offered by Umno. The deliberations continued the next day and by nightfall a

Two-and-a-half months later, on Oct. 10, when the end-of-year Budget session got off to a start, the first hint of trouble appeared.

The Speaker of the Dewan Rakyat, Datuk Mohamad Zahir Ismail, did not inform the House whether the Bill, together with seven others, had been gazetted as was customary.

The King, he said, had withheld the royal assent to the Bill.

During question time the next day, Mr Lim took the opportunity to suggest that the country was experiencing a constitutional crisis because of the unsigned Bills.

Banned

The Prime Minister said there was no such crisis. He also told Mr Lim that the Government had banned and censored reports on the issue by foreign publications because the articles were aimed at the Rulers who could not reply because of their privileged position.

Later on the same day, a motion, again introduced by Mr Lim, to debate the 'constitutional crisis' was thrown out. Datuk Mohamad Zahir rationalised that the fact that the Bills had not been signed did not mean that they would not be signed in the future.

By this time, however, public awareness of the gravity of the situation had increased.

Former Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman, in his weekly newspaper column, suggested that Clause 5 of Article 66 of the Constitution be invoked, postponing gazetting of the Bill.

This was to buy time for further political discussion between the Rulers and the Government.

A storm that was brewing within Umno manifested itself when, on Oct.

Until then, the Rulers had maintained silence. It was first broken by the Raja of Perlis on Nov. 7 during an investiture ceremony in conjunction with his 66th birthday.

Setting aside his prepared text, the Ruler talked straight and hit hard.

"Under the Constitution, five of the nine Rulers can decide on the appointment of one of them as the Yang di-Pertuan Agong. If the Yang di-Pertuan Agong fails to act constitutionally, the five Rulers who appointed him can take action to remove him," he said.

It was a thinly-veiled threat of the consequences if the King should set the public seal to the Bills against the wishes of his brother Rulers.

It was also the start of protracted negotiations between the Rulers and the executive. First, Perlis Menteri Besar Datuk Ali Haji Ahmad led a 93-member delegation to Istana Arau to an audience with the Raja of Perlis. They met for more than three hours. This opened the way for the other eight Menteris Besar to meet their Rulers at the bargaining table.

Tested

The meetings climaxed with the meeting between the Rulers and an Umno supreme council delegation led by vice-president Ghafar Baba at Istana Kayangan in Shah Alam on Nov 20. At the end of it, the Rulers agreed to consider several new proposals.

As the days passed and it became obvious that nothing much was happening, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir obtained the blessings of his Cabinet to take whatever action he deemed necessary to break the deadlock. He received his mandate on Nov. 25.

communique from the palace said counter-proposals had been made.

The Raja Muda of Perak, Tun Azlan Shah, acting as an emissary for the Rulers, conveyed the counter-proposals to Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir on Tuesday.

On Wednesday, there was a flurry of activity as the Raja Muda, after having briefed the King, got in touch with Rulers still in the country (the Sultans of Perak and Terengganu are overseas) and told them about the Government's position vis-a-vis the counter-proposals.

The very same afternoon, the Timbalan Yang di-Pertuan Agong granted royal assent to the Bill.

The Constitution, the Government, the Monarchy, the people; all had been tested. And passed.