

# Mahathir hits at critics

Prime minister compares critics  
with urban guerillas

By Suhaini Aznam in Kuala Lumpur

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Mahathir Mohamad's simmering irritation with his detractors spilled over on 21 December, when he addressed a 4,000-strong indoor rally on majority versus minority rights, lashing out at "intellectual elites" and individuals who used their organisations to build up a personal power base.

Mahathir's exasperation with voluntary groups — and their leaders — turned into open confrontation on 10 December when he challenged groups aspiring to power to openly register themselves as political parties. Four days later, Federal Territory Minister Datuk Abu Hassan Omar named five of these groups (REVIEW, 1 Jan.) — Aliran, the Consumers' Association of Penang, the Environmental Protection Society of Malaysia, the Selangor Graduates Society and the Bar Council — and the debate over definitions of democracy picked up.

The Mahathir rally, organised by the nine-day-old Action Group to Uphold Democratic Principles, was thus a rebuttle to weeks of more spontaneous gatherings and public lectures on democracy and citizens' rights by public activists. The Action Group comprises 64 trade associations and guilds, mostly from the federal territory. Its president Mochamad Izat Emir, chairman of the Federal Territory Malay Chamber of Commerce, is widely identified as pro-United Malays National Organisation (Umno), though he denies that he supports any politician.

The rally, complete with the singing of patriotic songs and the national anthem, was held at the Putra World Trade Centre owned by Umno, the dominant party in the National Front coalition government, of which Mahathir is president.

"The majority must respect the right of the minority to voice their opinions but the majority must not be forced to accept minority views," said Mahathir, opening his 45-minute lecture on democracy. The National Front government had held elections a whole year before its term of office expired, during recession, confounding predictions that it would fall, he reminded his audience. Its victory proved that the majority supported the National Front government.

Yet his critics refused to accept this gracefully, he said. Repeatedly, Mahathir described their "evil intent"

to create restlessness and uncertainty so that local and foreign investors were scared away, the recession prolonged, while hawkers and small businessmen suffered and graduates remained unemployed.

The government had introduced several measures to revive the economy, improving liquidity and amending the Industrial Coordination Act, he said. But the critics ignored this and kept harping about a crisis of confidence, when "actually most people support the government. Truly this minority really wants to rule this country," Mahathir declared.

In a democracy, unpopular leaders could be replaced, he said later. This is unlike an autocracy, where "a leader who cannot be changed will be entrenched with his power and eventually forget public interests and promote only his own interests," and citizens would suffer because eventually "that unelected leader will be estranged from the people."

"If we choose a government, we must support that government because that government will ensure that the democratic system will continue," he stressed.

**M**ahathir's presence at the rally surprised observers who had not realised how seriously he appeared to take recent criticisms levelled against the National Front, a phenomenon that escalated before the August general elections, then fell quiet but has of late revived.

Referring to the groups he sees as the opposition, he said: "Just because they consider themselves more clever than ordinary citizens, [they think] others are not qualified to make decisions," he declared. "In their minds, only they are clever." Acknowledging that many citizens were not as educated as these public activists, this did not mean that others should just surrender their rights, he said to applause.

Dismissing opposition to the recently amended and strengthened Official Secrets Act (OSA), Mahathir countered that the very fact that an anti-OSA campaign existed and received press coverage, proved that democracy was alive, unlike in some countries "where anyone who speaks against the government will be thrown in prison."

"But they are still free to travel all over, to attack the government, to slander and lie all the time!" he declared to stray shouts of "arrest them" from supporters.

These "frustrated" groups had influenced certain people whom they dragged around to make speeches, "like parrots who speak well" but without comprehension, he said. (A likely target of his sarcasm, former auditor-general Tan Sri Ahmad Noordin Zakaria, now leading the Freedom of Information Movement, replied the next day that

criticising political decisions did not mean one had political ambitions. People should not be classified as being pro or anti-government, he said. "As there are many colours, so are there many shades of opinion.")

The prime minister also said that the activist groups had friends in the local media and among foreign publications "which naturally have their own interests that conflict with this country's interests." Financed from abroad, the groups tried to subvert and weaken democracy here, he added.

"So the question is are they truly loyal to this country or to those who pull the string from outside?" he demanded. Since some groups refused to accept money from the government, fearing control — but were willing to accept foreign aid — logic followed that they



Mahathir: Irritated.

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had fallen under foreign control, he said. Their frequent attempts to blacken the country's image stemmed from their indebtedness. "They have become tools."

Mahathir's tirade was particularly harsh against the proponents of democracy who were themselves "lifetime presidents," who claimed to speak for their organisations but actually represented just one voice. Without naming names, Mahathir obviously alluded to the organisations named by Abu Hassan when he said that leaders of environmental, consumer or professional bodies who did not declare their political stands were cheating their members.

Rallies are very much the style of Mahathir when he wants to take an issue to the people, starting with the string of rallies during the "constitutional crisis" of 1983 over the power of the traditional rulers. Nevertheless, some felt that he had perhaps indirectly given his detractors added legitimacy by his response.

To this, Mahathir explained that he was trying to nip a potentially dangerous trend in the bud. Urban terrorists were born of such groups, which when thwarted, looked for extra-legal methods to achieve their goals — such as the Baader-Meinhoff gang in Germany, Italy's Red Brigade and the Japanese Red Army, he said.

This had already taken root here, Mahathir added, citing the Memali incident where armed villagers — followers of a religious leader from the opposition Parti Islam — had clashed with police in November 1985. This happened because a minority had lost through democratic elections, so resorted to force "hoping that arms would help them topple the government," he said. □