

Dr M BREAKS SILENCE AND JOINS THE FRAY

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KUALA LUMPUR, Mon. — The Umno election campaign, already heading into overdrive, took a surprising turn last week when party president and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad decided to take a personal hand.

His silence during the build-up to the campaign since his return from India last month had puzzled many but it was generally assumed that he had decided to adopt an "above-the-fray" stand while observing the goings-on.

It was a move which in American parlance would be called the *Rose Garden* strategy — when the President stays in the White House and attends to affairs of State while lesser mortals go out on the campaign trail.

But last week, Dr Mahathir decided that it was time to get into the act. It was a decision which had to be weighed carefully since by joining the fray, he would risk jeopardising his office and overnight, become just another candidate.

Dr Mahathir has obviously decided that the risk was worth it. And he has come out swinging. In turn, his speech at Kuala Kubu Baru on Saturday led to Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah — who had so far contained his criticisms to generalities — to hit back with specific criticisms of the Mahathir

reign.

Ironically enough, however, neither Dr Mahathir nor the Trade and Industry Minister is yet an official candidate for the presidency.

It is assumed that the Prime Minister will defend his presidency and it is also assumed that he will be contested by Tengku Razaleigh.

In Kuala Kubu Baru, however, Dr Mahathir said that an Umno president could not be effective if he had just a 55 per cent majority and told party members: "If you don't want me, just let me know. There is no need to push me down."

"*Air dicincang tak akan putus tapi bila beku akan pecah* (water will not snap when chopped but can be broken when it's frozen)," he said.

Although stressing that his remarks were not campaign rhetoric but "advice to the party members," his remarks have given rise to some interesting possibilities, including the possibility of a compromise being worked out to avoid a clash.

He followed this up with his speech in Malacca yesterday, where he spoke about how Umno deputy presidents should publicly support the top man no matter what the private disagreements between them.

And later, talking to reporters, he said that he was willing to listen to offers of a compromise provided he knows the terms first.

Incidentally, the differ-

ence between print media and electronic media came out very clearly in that last remark. His words, seen in black and white in the newspapers today, appeared to convey a different meaning than when seen on the news on TV last night, where he appeared to be jesting with reporters.

But while Dr Mahathir was in Malacca, Tengku Razaleigh had taken up the cudgel in Kuala Lipis, where he — for the first time in this campaign — di-

rectly criticised Dr Mahathir for his leadership of the party and nation.

The Trade and Industry Minister also openly came out against the party's proposed move into Sabah.

And, despite Dr Mahathir's advice to party members not to "push me down," the nominations for Tengku Razaleigh continued to roll in.

The important fact here is not that the challenger has got only 20 nominations to Dr Mahathir's nearly 50

but that 20 divisions have openly nominated Tengku Razaleigh in an unprecedented public show of defiance.

It is the first time in Umno history that a challenger has secured this many nominations. Haji Sulaiman Palestin obtained only one when he challenged Tun Hussein Onn in 1978, and ended up with 250 votes to Tun Hussein's 898.

Dr Mahathir's speeches have also marked out the main campaign theme he will be using — party unity. He has repeatedly stressed on how a contest could wreck this unity.

But the challengers appear set to take the battle to the party president. Datuk Musa said in Subang Jaya yesterday that no contest had ever destroyed party unity.

Instead, he said, his contest for the deputy presidency in 1981 with Tengku Razaleigh had strengthened Umno and helped the party score a major victory in the 1982 general election.

With the major players — Dr Mahathir, Tengku Razaleigh, Datuk Musa and Deputy Prime Minister Abdul Ghafar Baba — getting involved directly, there was nothing holding back their supporters.

And these *gurkhas* fanned out across the country spreading their respective leaders' message and taking pop shots at their counterparts on the other sides.

If Umno Youth chief Anwar Ibrahim, a strong sup-

porter of Dr Mahathir, was upholding the party president's leadership, supreme council member Datuk Seri Adib Adam took a swipe at the former Malaysian Muslim Youth Movement chief (Abim) by telling party members "not to vote in as leaders those who have belittled or insulted Umno."

Amidst the heat of campaign rhetoric, Defence Minister and Umno vice-president Datuk Abdullah Ahmad Badawi tried to inject some calming words when he said in Penang that supporters of leaders should not go overboard in their campaigning.

It is advice which will be sorely tested this week, given the events that have been lined up.

Tengku Razaleigh's Gua Musang division is planning a mammoth gathering for Friday when Datuk Musa comes to open its delegates meeting while up in Kedah — Dr Mahathir's home State — the remaining 13 divisions will be holding their delegates meetings from Friday to Sunday.

Dr Mahathir is likely to have a very large lead in the nominations race when the delegates meetings end on Sunday and the votes from all 132 divisions are tallied.

But the odd nomination here and there for Tengku Razaleigh — he will definitely get one more from Gua Musang — is likely to provide just as much a talking point as the campaign heads for the penultimate lap.