

Malaysian Ruler's Party Turning Against Him As Discontent Grows

By Michael Richardson
International Herald Tribune

KUALA LUMPUR, Malaysia — Less than nine months after leading Malaysia's ruling coalition to a resounding victory in a general election, Prime Minister Mahathir bin Mohamad is facing a major challenge from within his party.

Nearly 1,500 delegates from the United Malays National Organization, known as UMNO, will vote Friday to choose party leaders for a three-year term.

For the first time in the 41 years since the party was founded, its president, Mr. Mahathir, is embroiled in a serious contest.

Critics contend that his administration has weakened the country and the party through economic mismanagement, authoritarian controls and toleration of corruption in high places.

Mr. Mahathir has vigorously defended his handling of affairs, asserting that falling international demand and prices for Malaysia's main exports in the past few years have been largely responsible for the country's economic troubles. Malaysia's main exports are oil, tin, rubber, and forest products.

Criticism of Mr. Mahathir's performance and abrasive style is widespread. Nearly half the members of his party in the cabinet have turned against the prime minister, and two former prime ministers, both leaders of the party, have publicly called for a change at the top.

Mr. Mahathir, who became the party's president and Malaysia's prime minister in 1981, is being challenged by his trade and industry minister, Razaleigh Hamza.

Musa Hitam, a former deputy prime minister who resigned in

February 1986, citing differences with Mr. Mahathir, is trying to keep his post as deputy party president against an ally of Mr. Mahathir.

Most analysts believe the results of the contest for the party's top two positions will be close, with Mr. Mahathir generally favored to retain the presidency by a narrow margin and Mr. Musa likely to hold the deputy presidency.

Critics of the prime minister and his close associates, most of them allied to Mr. Razaleigh and Mr. Musa, are trying to gain control of other elected positions in the party, including its supreme council.

The outcome of the struggle will have a significant impact on Malaysia. The United Malays National Organization is the dominant partner in the National Front, a coalition of more than 10 parties that controls the federal government in Kuala Lumpur and almost all state governments.

UMNO is the main party of the Malays, who form about half the 16 million population. Remaining parties in the front represent Chinese, Indians and other ethnic groups.

The party won 83 of the 148 National Front seats in general elections last August. There are 177 seats in Malaysia's parliament.

Analysts say that in those elections a challenge from an Islamic Malay opposition party and other factors forced the United Malays National Organization to close ranks. Since then, factionalism has re-emerged.

By tradition, the UMNO president has automatically become prime minister. But Mr. Mahathir declared last week that even if he



Mahathir bin Mohamad

were defeated Friday, it would not be necessary for him to resign.

He has accused his rivals of threatening to split his party and undermine the government because of personal ambition.

He has also alleged that several countries, which he did not name, were attempting to influence the outcome.

Analysts here, however, believe that domestic concerns, not foreign interference, are the driving force behind the conflict in the party.

Because of bitter divisions between the rival camps, chances of a lasting reconciliation within the party are considered slim. Aides of Mr. Mahathir have warned that he will purge the government of dissenters if he wins.