

Saw or scalpel?

FROM OUR SOUTH-EAST ASIA CORRESPONDENT

Despite his background in medicine, **Dr Mahathir Mohamad** has never been noted for compassion in his six years as prime minister of Malaysia. The cabinet reshuffle following the conference on April 24th of the United Malays National Organisation was never likely to be a pleasant affair. UMNO is the largest party in the ruling coalition. Its president, elected at a conference every three years, is automatically prime minister, and it is "not in the Malay tradition" to challenge his authority openly.

Yet that is what five of the dozen UMNO cabinet ministers did. Mr Razaleigh Hamza, the trade and industry minister and a prince in one of Malaysia's numerous royal families, ran for the presidency against his prime minister. His ally, running for re-election as deputy president, was Mr Musa Hitam, who had resigned last year as deputy prime minister after a quarrel with Dr Mahathir. The contest for the votes of the party's 1,479 delegates was hard and nasty: defamatory letters were circulated in the delegates' hotels; bribes of M\$50,000 (\$20,000) were allegedly on offer to floating voters.

In the end, after rumour and recount, the challengers failed. Mr Razaleigh lost to Dr Mahathir by 43 votes; and Mr Musa lost to the present deputy prime minister, Mr Ghafar Baba, by 40 votes—in a ballot in which 41 votes were declared spoiled. Two of the three vice-presidents elected are supporters of Dr Mahathir, as are 16 of the 25 members of the party's new Supreme Council. So 61-year-old Dr Mahathir, who had said he would keep his job even if his majority were a single vote, has a comfortable cushion for the next three

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years. The resignations from the cabinet on April 29th of Mr Razaleigh and his supporter, the foreign minister, Mr Rais Yatim, were expected. Dr Mahathir then sacked all his other cabinet opponents.

The fact that almost half the party's delegates were prepared to flout tradition and oppose the leader is a sign of weariness with Dr Mahathir's autocratic style and with the corruption that plagues Malaysian politics. The party's moderates, including elder statesmen such as a former prime minister, Mr Hussein Onn, had advised Dr Mahathir to show at least a semblance of magnanimity in the uses to which he put his victory. He has not taken that advice.

Conflict may mar the 1990 party conference, too. That is also the year by which the government's New Economic Policy, begun in 1970, is supposed to give the Malay half of the population 30% of the ownership of an economy still dominated by the Chinese third of the people. At the moment the Malay share of corporate wealth is about 18%, so the NEP's deadline will almost certainly be extended.

Meanwhile, Chinese optimists believe Dr Mahathir will need non-Malay allies against his UMNO opponents, so will soft-pedal on Malay rights. Chinese pessimists believe Dr Mahathir will want to woo UMNO support by delivering more goods to the Malays. The only silver lining in the affair is that the doctor's close call shows that Malaysia is one of the few countries in the region where a change of leadership by a free vote is a real possibility.