

MALAYSIA

P Mahathir

The Price of Victory



It was shortly after 10 p.m. on April 24, a day of decision for Malaysia. At Sri Perdana, official residence of the prime minister, supporters of Dr. Mahathir Mohamad had expected to be celebrating by now. But the mood at Sri Perdana was subdued. Mahathir, looking calm but exhausted, had a late supper as he awaited word from the World Trade Centre, headquarters of his United Malays National Organisation, dominant partner in the ruling Barisan Nasional coalition. With two three-year terms as UMNO president behind him, Mahathir

this day had faced a formidable challenge — unprecedented in party history — as he went for a third. Challenging the blunt-spoken physician from the northern state of Kedah was Trade & Industry Minister Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, a prince from northeastern Kelantan who had twice been thwarted in bids for the deputy leadership. If Razaleigh, 50, won this party election, he would replace Mahathir, 61, as prime minister.

There had been several false alarms and finally the anxious premier himself picked up a mobile phone to dial his agent in the counting hall. Another recount was in process. When the results came at around 10:45 p.m. there was a brief

silence, then half-hearted cheers. Mahathir had won — just. His majority, decided after two recounts, was 43 votes in a contest of 1,479 valid votes. Mahathir polled 761, or 51.45% of the total. Rival Razaleigh bagged 718, or 48.55%. By virtue of that slenderest of margins Mahathir would lead UMNO and Malaysia for another three years.

The close result had not been unexpected. But there was an upset in the battle for UMNO's deputy leadership. Mahathir's running mate and deputy prime minister Ghafar Baba ousted incumbent Musa Hitam, the party's No.2 for the past six years. Veteran Ghafar polled 739 — exactly 40 more than Musa, who had quit the

deputy premiership early last year and teamed up with Razaleigh for the contest. There were 41 spoilt votes; counters said they had been left blank. It took a few minutes for the crowd at Sri Perdana to digest the results. Then Mahathir and Ghafar were chaired, fireworks were set off, and the UMNO song was sung. Later a victory cake was brought in and a prayer was read.

Over at the World Trade Centre, emotions had flared. Soon after the results were announced, party supreme council member Marina Yusoff, her face flushed with anger, barged into the counting hall and questioned the results. Razaleigh, she declared, had led the poll at the first count with at least 800 votes. Through at least "two recounts," she claimed, his vote had progressively decreased. Later, Marina, a Razaleigh ally, conceded defeat. "It was a fair fight," she said. "We should give full support to the leadership." Meanwhile, an UMNO election committee spokesman said "for the post of president there was only one count."

Before the polls Mahathir had said he would serve a full three-year term even if he won by just one vote. Now, beaming at TV cameras, he asked: "Wasn't the majority more than one?" The premier asked UMNO members to close ranks in the interests of Malay race, religion and country, and said the primary task now was the smooth running of the party and the nation. Mahathir said he had expected to win and the narrow majority was not a "setback." Razaleigh, who had been confident of victory all along, said he

was "disappointed" to have lost but would "not give up hope." He added: "What is important is party unity." Razaleigh said he thought he and his group still had a role to play. "We still represent 50% of UMNO. We are still a force to reckon with," he declared.

"The results show a return to tradition," UMNO secretary-general and Agriculture Minister Sanusi Junid told Asiaweek. "The prime minister and deputy prime minister must also be president and deputy president of UMNO," he maintained. "The deputy president cannot be a person who cannot work with the president. The Tengku Razaleigh-Musa combination would not have been feasible; it would have led to an era of turbulence. The [Mahathir-Ghafar] combination will lead to stability." Musa, 53, whose resignation from government followed allegations that he was plotting to overthrow Mahathir, thought differently. "I interpret that the support for us is substantial," he said. "It was very close."

The contests for the party's three vice-presidencies produced one new face.

Incumbent Wan Mokhtar Ahmad took the first spot with 935 votes. Chief minister of northeastern Trengganu state, he was running on the Mahathir slate but with open support from a section of the Musa-Razaleigh camp. Another incumbent, Defence Minister Abdullah Badawi, a close associate of Musa, came in second with 879 votes. The newcomer at vice-president level: former UMNO youth leader Anwar Ibrahim, one of Mahathir's closest associates, who finished third with 850 votes. The leading losers: Foreign Minister Rais Yatim, a Musa supporter, with 690 votes; Perak Chief Minister Ramli Ngah Talib, a Mahathir ally, who polled 667; and charismatic former Selangor chief minister Harun Idris, 396. Kelantan MP and former deputy minister Abdullah Ahmad said the VP results showed that party members were "trying to strike a balance by giving both sides a chance to be represented on the supreme council."

The campaign was the fiercest, most expensive and divisive in the party's 41-year history. From the start there were two major camps, Mahathir's supporters and those who opposed him. There were few neutrals. Of the dozen UMNO nominees in the coalition cabinet, five openly campaigned against Mahathir. Three days before polling, Culture, Youth & Sports Minister Najib Razak who had privately been backing Razaleigh and Musa jumped the fence and declared his support for Mahathir. "It is a blow for us, though I wouldn't say it is a big blow," said a Musa supporter. Only Information Minister Tengku Ahmed Rithauddeen, also from a Kelantan royal family, remained neutral to the end. In his words it was "the best stand to take" in a heated contest.

There were charges from both sides that money was playing an important role in winning support. Public Enterprises Minister Rafidah Aziz alleged that one of her associates was offered a M\$10,000 bribe. The UMNO ethics committee, however, found no evidence to back her charge. In the final days of the campaign, delegates and their friends were dined and feted in hotels. The going rate for the few genuine "floating voters" was M\$50,000 or more, observers reported. Analysts said it was difficult to assess what each camp spent on its election campaign. But they estimated that combined expenses, from branch elections to the last day of polling, could run into tens of millions of dollars.

Money aside, the campaigning was somewhat subtle in keeping with Malay traditions, shadow boxing being more acceptable than the open fistfight. Razaleigh did not declare his candidacy until April 11, the last day for filing acceptance of nomination papers. Even then he avoided the limelight, concentrating his ef-

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forts on wooing the nearly 1,500 delegates in closed-door meetings instead of reaching out through the media as Mahathir and Ghafar did. Razaleigh's reluctance to declare his candidacy early was characterised as indecision by his opponents. They spread rumours that he might be trying to strike a deal with Mahathir to eliminate his old enemy Musa. But sources in both factions say there was never a compromise package. "Both Mahathir and Razaleigh are proud men and like all proud people they don't understand the meaning of compromise," said one senior UMNO leader who has known both for several years.

Mahathir too started his campaign late after managing to stay out of the headlines for several weeks. When he did finally enter the fray he said was campaigning reluctantly. "I have to go everywhere

as if we were facing a general election," he remarked. At 61, Mahathir was a tireless campaigner covering the length and breadth of the country. On days that he was in Kuala Lumpur, he met political associates and aides in the office and spent evenings meeting or dining with groups of delegates at his official residence.

Mahathir played on tradition — an important element in the conservative Malay-Muslim society. By mounting a strong challenge against the incumbent premier and party leader, Razaleigh had broken an important tradition and the media — much of it either state-controlled

or UMNO-owned — harped on the theme. "The subtle question," said one newsman, was: "Do those who break traditions have any place in the society?" The media blitz against Razaleigh and Musa, say many observers, may have backfired on Mahathir. Remarkd one Chinese politician: "This was a party caucus with just 1,500 divisional leaders selecting a leader but it seems some of the campaigners were

using general elections tactics as if they were trying to reach 15 million people to pressure the 1,500 delegates." Musa-Razaleigh supporters, at first angered by the lopsided media attention, in the end were glad the spotlight was squarely on Mahathir. "By highlighting only what Mahathir, Ghafar and Anwar say, the media also highlights their mistakes," said one opposition supporter. "By ignoring us they also turn a blind eye to our errors. Media is a sword that cuts both ways. We are glad we didn't have too much publicity." But with the opposition virtually blacked out, poison-pen letters and pam-

phlets were the order of the day. Most contained wild allegations against one camp or the other.

In the heat of the campaign Mahathir branded his opponents "traitors to the Malays and the party" because, he alleged, they were disrupting unity. Mahathir said the leadership contest was "an attempt by a group to seize power."

He also charged that "some countries" were "attempting to get weak leaders elected" in UMNO. He did not name any countries but referred to "Zionists" who opposed Malaysia and its Islamic policies. Mahathir fired his first salvo by saying he would step down if party members wanted him to. "If you don't want me, tell me," he said. "Don't push me down." Later, while on a brief trip to Brunei, he said he would retain power "even if I win

by only one vote." Towards the end of the campaign Mahathir said a prime minister need not step down if he lost his party post. The prime minister, he said, could only be removed through a parliamentary vote of no confidence. Opponents reckoned those cryptic comments harmed his campaign.

Musa and Razaleigh campaigned on several key issues: the depressed economy, wastage of public funds on big projects such as the Penang bridge that links the island with the mainland, and the Mamin-to affair in which the government lost more than \$300 million trying to corner the

tin market to lift prices for Malaysian tin. Mahathir responded to the allegations by declassifying top-secret cabinet papers in an effort to show that Musa and Razaleigh, both in cabinet then, were party to the collective decisions initiated by the PM. But the government refused to declassify papers relating to the Maminco affair or the UMBC scandal in which Mahathir's close friend, Finance Minister Daim Zainuddin, mopped up a majority stake in the country's third-largest bank after largest shareholder Pernas, a government corporation, was told not to take up a rights issue. Daim later sold the shares to Pernas at a price higher than what Pernas would have paid if it had been allowed to subscribe to the rights in the first place.

Mahathir's faction recalled the 1985 Memali incident in Kedah State in which eighteen men, including four policemen, died in a shootout between radical supporters of fundamentalist Parti Islam Sa-Malaysia and security forces. Musa was home minister at the time and kept in touch with operations there. Some Mahathir supporters called Musa a murderer because, they said, he should bear full responsibility for all police actions. Musa said he had briefed Mahathir about the incident immediately and even advised him to cancel his impending trip to China. But Mahathir had left the problem to him and the police. Mahathir's men also referred to Razaleigh's and Musa's private lives. Razaleigh's bachelor status was deemed a liability in the campaign. Musa was divorced from his Peruvian wife last year and in September wed a Malaysian fashion model.

For winner Mahathir, daunting tasks lay ahead. Former prime minister and

UMNO leader Hussein Onn was "most struck by the small majority." The narrow margin, he told Asiaweek, "shows that there are very deep divisions in the party with regard to Dr. Mahathir's leadership." In order to heal the wounds and re-unite the party, Mahathir must now listen to his opponents, "especially [regarding] his policies and style of leadership." Hussein was invited to attend the assembly, then was told the invitation was withdrawn, and finally was re-invited. At that point he declined to attend. Mahathir "must really work with all members of UMNO, not play favourites," said Hussein. "He must make a genuine effort to weed out corrupt people and clean this government. That's the message I read from the results." Hussein

felt advantage of incumbency and a media blitz helped Mahathir and Ghafar.

With only a "wafer-thin majority," the premier and his deputy now "have to re-establish their legitimacy," said opposition Democratic Action Party leader Lim Kit Siang. "It highlights the fundamental crisis of confidence in the country . . . I hope the Prime Minister will be able to address himself to the basic questions of integrity, morality and accountability in government." Former Socialist People's Party leader Kassim Ahmad, who resigned from UMNO last year, took a different view. "Although the margin was small, it is still a victory," he said. He attributed Mahathir's and Ghafar's slim majorities to "very bad campaign practices." Said Kassim: "A lot of slander and lies were uttered by the Musa-Razaleigh faction. Mahathir has been too liberal with these people. Have you heard of any leader tolerating other senior leaders condemning the party and the prime minister? You can

have groups, but not slander and lies."

According to Dr. Chandra Muzaffar, leader of reform movement Aliran, "the UMNO assembly chose to keep the establishment in the government. It didn't want to risk the change." The delegates, Chandra told Asiaweek, "didn't know how the Musa-Razaleigh team would work, given their past rivalry." Another factor: the party's traditional loyalty to the leadership. "The narrow margin shows clearly the widespread dissatisfaction within party leadership," said Chandra. "The delegates wanted to convey a message but didn't go the whole way." Kamaruddin Mohamad Noor, an UMNO leader from Kelantan, blamed Musa and Razaleigh for their loss. "The writing was on the wall," he said. "They were unable to back their allegations with any evidence."

What happens now? Most political pundits say UMNO is likely to close ranks, though it might take some time to heal the wounds. In the next few weeks UMNO faces a by-election in Razaleigh's home state Kelantan for the state assembly seat of Bukit Tuku, a former stronghold of opposition Bas. The Barisan coalition also faces a by-election for the parliamentary seat of Gopeng in Perak, vacated following the resignation of former MCA leader Tan Koon Swan, now serving a jail term in Singapore for criminal breach of trust. The night before the UMNO poll Aziz Shamsuddin, one of Mahathir's political secretaries and UMNO's division head in Gopeng, went over to the Musa-Razaleigh camp. With MCA bogged down with its own problems, the by-elections could go against Barisan.

Mahathir would now turn his attention to reorganising the government. In previous contests he had said "winners shouldn't take all and losers shouldn't lose all." But in recent weeks he has indicated there would be no place for his opponents on his new team. Sanusi said a purge of dissidents was necessary because "we cannot afford people who decide together in the cabinet and then leave and attack the decisions." Musa said "a witch hunt would be unjust and wrong," but he conceded it was Mahathir's privilege to fire people. "That's the price one has to pay for trying to go against those in power." Hussein Onn thinks Razaleigh and Musa are not finished just yet. "In politics there's always another chance," he said.

Musa was keeping his options open. Analysts say he is likely to take a long break from politics before deciding whether or not to return to active public life. Razaleigh, with close to 49% of votes, would almost certainly try for the leadership in 1990 when Mahathir steps down. Most pundits think it will be a Razaleigh-Ghafar fight.