

Razaleigh quits after Mahathir survives by narrowest margin

## The vital forty-three



Given political realities, there seems no reason why Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Mahathir Mohamad — smarting from retaining the leadership of Malaysia's de

facto ruling United Malays National Organisation (Umno) by a heart-stopping 43 votes — would allow his opponents a platform from which to launch another assault against him come the next party election in 1990.

Two of his challengers did not wait to see if he would accommodate or purge them. On 28 April, two days after the party assembly ended, Mahathir's direct opponent, Trade and Industry Minister Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, and his ally, Foreign Minister Datuk Rais Yatim, handed in letters of resignation. Mahathir did not immediately accept their offer, which may trigger further resignations from their allies in the cabinet, and save one or two of the less strident critics.

It was exactly this likelihood of a "winner-take-all" outcome that had party members bemoaning the loss of several good, experienced leaders, long before the assembly itself. A fairly major cabinet shake-up seems certain now, followed by other moves by

Mahathir to consolidate his position.

Although delegate after delegate urged a closing of ranks after the results of the 24 April election were announced, Mahathir himself offered no olive branch to his vanquished opponents. Closing the assembly on 26 April, he reminded delegates that when people take part in a contest, "they know the risks involved.

"We must be aware that if we win, we get something and that if we lose, we will not get it," he said. "I myself realised that fairly early and I accepted the fact that in the event that I lost, it

would be impossible for me to continue living in Sri Perdana [his official residence] and remain as prime minister."

Razaleigh seemed to share these sentiments. "We fought, we lost," said one of his supporters. "Razaleigh is a gentleman. He would resign."

The campaign had been intense; the results closer than many insiders had anticipated. Umno presidents have not been seriously challenged before and the stature of his opponent, a senior leader in his own right with an unwaveringly loyal following in the northeastern state of Kelantan, coupled with the bitter acrimony between the two camps, plus the narrow victory margin itself, have eroded Mahathir's authority.

"Mahathir is hurt," said a political aide of his running mate, Deputy Prime Minister Ghafar Baba, on the eve of the party assembly. "Compromise would be difficult after this kind of campaign," he said, pointing to the throng crowding the lobby of a leading hotel here, waiting for Razaleigh to address them in a final rally, where cyclostyled anonymous and usually scurrilous "flying letters" were rapidly changing hands.

The Razaleigh-Datuk Musa Hitam campaign enjoyed the romance normally attached to a challenge. Throughout the two-month campaign, their rallies had generally drawn larger crowds,

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giving a sense of a popular groundswell against Mahathir, which was not necessarily reflected among delegates. To some extent, their numbers inspired a bandwagon effect. The Razaleigh-Musa team also understood campaign packaging. In addition to the serious issues they brought up against Mahathir and his allies at a series of state-to-state closed-door meetings — their message made more widespread via an insider network distributing video tapes, jokingly dubbed "TV Four" — there were also catchy slogans, Razaleigh-Musa lighters boasting "We want change," and bumper stickers declaring "We want two-car," a pun on the Malay word *tukar* or change.

While fun, perhaps this aspect of their campaign was too gimmicky for such an emotional and vital contest, which would decide not only the party leadership but the premiership which goes with it.

The closely contested election had pared the ranks of the uncommitted to 10% in the last days of campaigns. Save for loyalist bravado, both sides were uncertain up to the last minute, even after all votes had been cast. The last-minute swing to Mahathir, said delegates in the first reactions to the results, came either in the early hours on the day of election itself or during the long break for Friday prayers. Without that break, Musa at least might well have won, said a Razaleigh supporter.

Although they were fighting an uphill battle as underdogs, Razaleigh's supporters have long had a reputation of being overconfident — and up to the last day, this appeared to be true again. Sources close to Musa felt after the event that they might have grown com-

placent and let down their guard in the final hours before the vote.

In the event, both Mahathir and Ghafar won with almost identical margins — the 1,479 delegates obviously voting more or less for what had been labelled Team A and Team B. Ghafar's victory, even by 40 votes, was a surprise, for even Mahathir allies had privately admitted that the 62-year-old vice-president had a difficult task unseating incumbent deputy president Musa — the focal point for Mahathir critics ever since Musa resigned from the cabinet in 1986, citing their differences and the prime minister's allegedly autocratic style.

Musa and Razaleigh were always odd partners, being old-time rivals, and in the immediate post-election analysis a number of delegates suggested that Musa had lost because Razaleigh's die-hard supporters had withheld their votes from him. Forty-one blank ballot slips were found when the votes were counted and listed as "spoilt." Following this theory, some Razaleigh supporters could not forget the bitterness between the two in 1981 and 1984 when they had vied for the deputy president's post. At the same time, they could not bring themselves to vote for Ghafar, who is allied to Mahathir, it was suggested. Significantly, there were no spoilt ballots in the voting for the president's post.

Gossip produced other, minority theories. One was that during the prayer break on the Friday before the voting, heavy lobbying persuaded some delegates to withhold their votes from

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Musa even though they would not vote for Ghafar.



Beyond the top two posts, delegates returned candidates from both camps for the three posts of elected vice-presidents and 25 Supreme Council members, though their numbers weighed 2-1 in Mahathir's favour.

Incumbent Datuk Amar Wan Mokhtar Ahmad, with 935 votes, the highest score among the vice-presidents, has tried to remain fairly neutral in the campaign, while leaning slightly towards Mahathir. Mokhtar was one of the team of four who had flown to London to persuade Musa to reconsider his resignation last year, but as Trengganu chief minister had, together with the rest of the chief minister's lobby, endorsed Mahathir mid-way through the campaign. Balancing this, Defence Minister Datuk Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, the other incumbent and a long-time Musa ally, came in second place with 879 votes.

Tipping the scales in Mahathir's favour, Anwar, a Mahathir protégé and now a loyal ally, beat three other candidates for the third slot, polling 850 votes — a respectable victory for a first attempt, said his exuberant supporters. Anwar had taken a big risk in contesting the post, having relinquished his posi-

**MARGINS OF VICTORY**  
UMNO elections

PRESIDENT	
Candidates:	Votes
 Datuk Seri Mahathir Mohamad	761
 Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah	718

DEPUTY PRESIDENT	
Candidates:	Votes
 Abdul Ghafar Baba	739
 Datuk Musa Hitam	699

THREE ELECTED VICE-PRESIDENTS:	
Candidates:	Votes
Dato Seri Amar Wan Mokhtar Ahmad	935
Datuk Abdullah Ahmad Badawi	879
Anwar Ibrahim	850
Datuk Raja Yatim	690
Datuk Seri Ramli Ngah Talfib	667
Datuk Harun Idris	398

Elected       Not elected

REVIEW DIAGRAM by Rocky Hill

tion as Umno Youth chief, which allowed him an ex-officio seat on the council, a week earlier. Had he lost, he would have lost all.

Ironically, Anwar's move leaves the leadership of the vocal Youth wing — Umno's internal pressure group — to his former deputy, now acting Youth chief Datuk Najib Tun Abdul Razak, who is considered sympathetic to Musa, though he was included as one of the Youth executive councillors who endorsed the Mahathir-Ghafar team just days before the election.

Meanwhile, 17 of the 25 elected Supreme Council members are considered Mahathir allies, the other eight being shared between Razaleigh and Musa. Mahathir, however, can enhance his advantage through the appointments of one secretary-general, one treasurer, one information chief and seven more ordinary councillors. Mahathir-backed Perak Chief Minister Datuk Seri Ramli Ngah Talib, who had lost in the bid for vice-president, will very likely be appointed councillor, since it is almost imperative that chief ministers, as state liaison heads, be in the inner circle of the party policy-making body.

The first two days of the assembly crackled with tension. Both Mahathir and Musa were scrupulously controlled in their opening speeches, with Musa addressing the Youth and Women's wings on 23 April, the traditional duty of the deputy president, and Mahathir opening the Umno assembly proper the next day before the actual voting. Musa had learned his lesson from last year when his speech, speckled with barbs, backfired and he was severely criticised by delegates.

Mahathir touched on a wide range of economic and international issues, race and religion, while Musa harkened back

to the independence struggle and the spirit of 1946, the Malayan Union, Umno and the Malays.

**A**fter the voting, the tension was quickly dissipated, at least superficially. Urging unity, delegates went on to the usual Umno concerns of Bahasa Malaysia, Islamic values and matters affecting the rural economy. On the final day, both winners and losers asked for forgiveness "for any rough words" used in the heated campaign.

Musa delivered an emotional farewell speech, in which he asked the winners to "take good care of Umno." Although he had not revealed then that he intended to resign from the government, Razaleigh was visibly moved at different points during the closing addresses. "I hadn't wanted to defeat

Musa," said Ghafar simply. "All I could think of was that I wanted to win," he told the roaring crowd.

But it was Mahathir everyone wanted to hear from, and when he did speak, his message was fairly clear. Loyalty to himself was not a criterion in appointing cabinet ministers, he said. But ministers had to take an oath of office, promising to maintain secrecy and to be loyal to the country and constitution. In the heated campaign, especially the closed-door sessions, many issues had been brought up, some of which only cabinet ministers were privy to. The underlying message was that technically at least, Mahathir could sack ministers who had opposed him for breach of secrecy, if not on grounds of disloyalty.

Interestingly, and for the first time, delegates picked up on a suggestion initially made by University of Malaya law lecturer Prof. Nik Abdul Rashid Majid that all 1.4 million Umno members should vote for the party leaders — a one-man, one-vote system as in a general election — instead of empowering delegates to choose the leader of Malaysia's 15 million people, without even necessarily reflecting the wishes of the majority of their divisional members. This would also reduce the incidence of money politics, which in recent years has made Umno elections an increasingly expensive affair, said a few delegates who favoured the idea.

In the excitement of the contest, many ignored the fact that both teams belonged to the same party and that any differences that ensued would be one of style — and, added one cynical delegate, a matter of transferring the party plums and business licences from one camp to the other.

After the first shock of defeat, both Razaleigh and Musa regained their

composure but had very little to say of their future plans. Musa announced he would soon go on the *umrah* — an off-season Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca — while a Razaleigh aide confided that they had already cleared his office, knowing that whichever way it went, he would be vacating it.

Even given the wisdom of hindsight, Razaleigh would not have changed a single step or strategy in his campaign, he said. "I challenged the party president because of a swelling show of dissatisfaction. We must admit this," he explained.

"A loss is a loss even by one vote," quipped Musa, in a humorous twist to Mahathir's campaign declaration that victory by one vote was victory all the same. "A defeat is a defeat and it's something which we have to accept," he added more soberly. "I would like to assure [the party] that I am not going to create problems."

In electing Ghafar to replace Musa, the delegates had indicated two things, said political analysts. First they wanted a team that could work together, instead of one made ineffective through lack of mutual trust. The other was a willingness to do away with the internal check and balance in government and party, which had been considered so important earlier. Outside the Malay political milieu, Musa is considered to represent some kind of liberalising force to Mahathir's more-open Malay nationalism — whether or not deserved on either score. The label has sometimes been used against Musa, especially in a party whose single platform is Malay nationalism.

All eyes are now trained on Mahathir to see if, given that the Razaleigh-Musa team had polled

48.55% of the votes to his 51.45%, he would accommodate his opponents or go on a witch-hunt. Apart from Razaleigh and Rais, three other ministers and several deputy ministers had allied themselves to the challengers and are in danger of losing their jobs.

Sacking his opponents would make them martyrs and heighten resentment from Musa and Razaleigh loyalists, especially in their home states of Johor and Kelantan, still smarting from being so close to tasting the fruits of victory. Despite Musa and Razaleigh's attempts to calm the situation, some die-hards

were heard privately consoling each other that "it was so close, it wasn't a defeat at all."

Musa and Razaleigh were quick to leave the onus of building bridges to Mahathir, while making themselves available to overtures on compromise. "If the leadership thinks I can play a role, in any small way, even if I am not holding high office I mean, I am available," said Musa, while conceding that it would be quite difficult for the victors to accept the idea of a role for him.

Before offering his resignation, Razaleigh had predicted that "if there is a witch-hunt, members will not forget and forgive. This will destroy the party."

Accommodation need not necessarily take the form of absorbing opponents into one's government, however, remarked a political scientist. The logic of numbers indicated that Mahathir will have to take stock of the criticisms levelled against him if he is to avoid a repeated open confrontation in 1990.

The single most striking aspect of this Umno election was "the emergence of substantial numbers who are willing to be openly critical of the leadership," said Aliran president Chandra Muzaffar, pointing to the expansion of the Malay middle class as one of the major contributors to the sustained challenge. This election has changed the relationship between the leaders and the led, he added. ■