

Seven rebels are purged after the Umno revolt

Dr Mahathir's surgery

By Suhaini Aznam in Kuala Lumpur

The handshakes, hugs and unity speeches were indeed cosmetic and short-lived. Prime Minister Datuk Seri Mahathir Mohamad lost no time in wiping the slate clean after his narrow margin in retaining the leadership of the dominant United Malays National Organisation (Umno). Three ministers and four deputy ministers were sacked on 30 April, four days after the culmination of a watershed party assembly which saw Mahathir re-elected as party president by only 43 out of 1,479 votes, narrowly beating challenger Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah (REVIEW, 7 May).

The sackings followed on the heels of the resignations of Razaleigh himself, as trade and industry minister, and of Foreign Minister Datuk Rais Yatim, who had supported his bid for the leadership. Mahathir, who had not immediately accepted their offers to resign on 28 April, accepted them two days later when he purged the cabinet of all Razaleigh supporters. Razaleigh later said that he would not rejoin the government even if invited to, "unless the prime minister changes his ways."

No replacements were immediately announced. With one exception, the five ministerial vacancies will be filled at least temporarily by Umno ministers who had supported Mahathir, in addition to their current portfolios. The jobs left by the deputies will remain vacant.

Deputy Prime Minister Ghafar Baba will fill in for outgoing Defence Minister Datuk Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, Information Minister Tengku Ahmad Rithaudeen Ismail will take on Rais' duties, Agriculture Minister Datuk Seri Sanusi Junid will take on Razaleigh's portfolio, Federal Territory Minister Datuk Abu Hassan Omar will assume Welfare Minister Datuk Shahrir Samad's duties, while Kasitah Gadam, from Sabah and the only non-Umno minister involved in the exercise, will act for his fellow minister in the Prime Minister's Office, Datuk Abdul Ajib Ahmad.

The deputies who were dropped were Deputy Primary Industries Minister Datuk Radzi Sheikh Ahmad, Deputy Foreign Minister Datuk Abdul Kadir Sheikh Fadzir, Deputy Transport Minister Datin Paduka Rahmah Osman and the Deputy Energy, Telecommunications and Posts Minister Datuk Zainal Abidin Zin.

"We accept the decision with an open heart, and full realisation that this action was taken solely because of our

stand in the recent party election," read Abdullah from a joint statement by the seven. "We will struggle to restore public confidence in Umno. We will oppose all actions that threaten Umno unity."

A proper reshuffle will only be made upon Mahathir's return from a private visit to the US on 14 May. Mahathir left for his son's graduation at the University of Tulsa, Oklahoma just hours before the sacking was announced, and is also to visit his daughter and new-born grandchild in Japan on his way home.

While those axed had seen it coming — "after all, when we went into it, we had thought of the consequences," said

gusted Perak delegate, visiting Abdullah at home. He recalled how Mahathir, in congratulating the Tan Koon Swan faction for winning the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) election in November 1985, after a bitter two-year war, had advised the MCA that "winners should not take all, while those defeated should not lose all."

"After all, even losers have their supporters and they have the right to their views," Mahathir had said at the time.

Razaleigh and Rais had both lost in the election, so it was only right that they resign, went the consensus. But the seven sacked had won their party positions — Abdullah coming in a respectable second of three elected vice-presidents. "They were sacked because they happened to support Musa and Razaleigh," declared Rais.

But cabinet appointments are the prerogative of the prime minister, chorused several Mahathir allies, as reactions to the expulsions grew heated. Mahathir is no different from his predecessors in "wanting a cabinet that has confidence in him and in whom he has confidence," said Education Minister Anwar Ibrahim.

"We accept that prerogative," Ajib said. "The rule of democracy is simple. When you win by one vote, you win. But how you exercise your power reflects your leadership capabilities."

Although Mahathir won the leadership struggle, the Razaleigh-Musa faction had polled a very considerable 48.55% of delegates' votes. "In other places, when a majority wins, often there is an effort to accommodate the wishes and aspirations of those who are not with him [the leader]," said Abdullah. But, he added, Mahathir has the corporate concept, whereby the majority shareholder gets his way.

Umno insiders expect at least two Mahathir allies to be given wider responsibilities or be promoted in the forthcoming exercise — Anwar and Mahathir's former political secretary, now Deputy Home Minister Datuk Seri Megat Junid Megat Ayub. In a further move to consolidate his position, some members also expect Mahathir to redesignate those vital posts of Umno state liaison chiefs currently held by mem-

Radzi — they objected to the manner in which it was done. Apart from the letters each had received informing them that their services were no longer required, their dismissals were announced in a two-page statement issued by the chief secretary, while Mahathir himself left the country. It was as if he wanted to "show that these seven were not important," said Rais indignantly. "Well, these nine [including himself and Razaleigh] are going to be very important."

Their supporters were less realistic and had actually hoped that Mahathir would retain at least those leaders who had been elected to Umno Supreme Council posts at the assembly, as all seven who were sacked had. "Words do not match deeds," said a dis-

bers of the Razaleigh camp, to the respective chief ministers who are his appointees.

"The message is clear," said Ajib. "Don't oppose me or oppose me at your own risk." By his actions, Mahathir has shown that "if you want to be in government, you must be the president's man," he added. "And if you are the president's man, you must not criticise."

The removal of his opponents seems to cancel out the theory that Mahathir might back Razaleigh as a holding proxy for his chosen successor, Anwar, as one of several possible scenarios for 1990 — when party elections are again due. Sources close to Musa now say Mahathir felt Razaleigh was even more of a threat than he did Musa, and had systematically set out to whittle down Razaleigh's powers by endorsing Musa as his running-mate in 1984, thereby removing Razaleigh from the top party echelons. To keep Musa in check, however, Mahathir retained Razaleigh as a minister despite Musa's initial objections.

The purged seven have pledged to continue the struggle — to hold talks with party members, using their positions as MPs, state liaison or divisional chiefs and members of the Umno Supreme Council. "After all, the basic issues of lack of confidence in government, corruption, the recession [all issues raised against Mahathir], still continue," said Shahrir.

There is also talk that some divisions would hold extraordinary general meetings, as provided for by the Umno constitution, to fight a rearguard battle to ensure that some control, at least at state level, remains in their hands.

Election repercussions have already begun in Musa's home state of Johor, where two identifiably pro-Musa state executive councillors were pressured into resigning on 3 May. Khadri Sabran is deputy chairman of Umno's Mersing division, where Ajib is chairman, and Hasmoni Salim is Kota Tinggi division chairman, the state seat within Musa's Segamat parliamentary constituency. State councillors hold prestigious office in the states, and have control over the state purse. Khadri was replaced the very next day by Johor Umno Youth chief Abu Bakar Dewa, whom insiders consider allied to the Mahathir camp.

"This is victimisation," said Shahrir. "It is fine for ministers to be sacked. But this is carrying it too far."

But Mahathir was by profession a doctor, with a professional ego, one of the delegates had remarked the day after the Umno results were announced and a purge looked likely. "He will not think of negotiating his way out of a problem the way his predecessors, with their legal backgrounds, would have done," he added. "The medical solution is to cut out the cancer." ■