

A third mandate for Mahathir

POST 3 - JUN 1987

AFTER a bitter and hotly contested election Umno re-elected its incumbent president, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad for a third three-year term. Challenging the leader had not been in the tradition of the so far sedate and polite Malay politics. So when the taboo was overcome the contest became truly sanguinary and few holds were barred.

The challenge had been put up by two erstwhile rivals, Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, 50, and Datuk Musa Hitam, 53. Twice in the past the two had duelled with each other over Umno's deputy presidency which also normally carried with it the job of Deputy Prime Minister. The winner on both occasions was Datuk Musa.

The two rivals formed an odd but strategic coalition. One, Tengku Razaleigh was a prince from the predominantly Malay State of Kelantan and the other, Datuk Musa, an ambitious secular-minded politician from Johore.

In the event it turned out to be a powerful alliance drawing support from both ends of the Umno spectrum. If Dr Mahathir did not happen to lose it was only for the reason that his opponents had been unable to make any reasonable case for a change in leadership or to convince the majority of delegates that they offered a better government. On the contrary many were concerned if this disparate Razaleigh-Musa team would be able to form a viable administration and not throw the country into turmoil and instability.

The Malaysian economy has been on the downturn because of the decline in commodity prices in the world market over the

past three years, according to Dr Mahathir, but Datuk Musa said the decline had not been due to the recession; it stemmed from Dr Mahathir's personality. Dr Mahathir, he said, had been severely critical of foreign countries and had been following discriminatory policies against some of them.

It has been suggested in Malaysia that the revolt against Dr Mahathir had also a possible external dimension and Datuk Musa's criticism seemed to point to the constituency he was trying to relate himself to.

Interestingly the first to desert Dr Mahathir was his (then) Foreign Minister Datuk Rais Yatim who probably knew better than others what the "foreign countries" were thinking about Malaysia. Datuk Rais' defection was followed by that of four other Ministers.

Sharp criticism

There is of course a great element of plausibility in this view that many foreign powers were not happy with Dr Mahathir's frank and forthright style of making foreign policy statements. He has been highly critical of hypocritical western policies towards South Africa's racist regime and their largely uncritical support of Israel to the complete exclusion of the rights of the Palestinian people.

He must have annoyed the British by questioning the value of the Commonwealth or of, at one time, seeking to "buy British goods last". Nor could he have endeared himself with the other superpower, the Soviet Union, by his firm and consistent opposition to the Soviet invasion and

occupation of Afghanistan as well as by talking about Muslims under Soviet rule.

America's pro-Israeli lobby was angered moreover when Malaysia cancelled the visit to Kuala Lumpur of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra because one of its numbers had Zionist intonation, but probably more seriously because of its support of the PLO and the hosting of an international conference on Palestine.

This much candour in foreign relations was sufficient enough to make foreign powers feel uncomfortable about "that man in Malaysia", but this was compounded by Dr Mahathir's occasional but sharp criticism of Western "civilisation". He is no "fundamentalist" in any sense of the word, but whenever asked whether he was a "fundamentalist", he would own it up and answer back: So what!

The anti-Mahathir campaign appears to have been planned with great finesse and huge resources were thrown into it. The challenger Tengku Razaleigh did not file his nomination papers until the very last day, April 11.

While the Razaleigh-Musa campaign among the 1,479 members of the electoral college — formed by 1,434 delegates, 36 supreme council members, five Wanita Umno representatives and four Youth representatives — was going on systematically, the absence of a formal contestant had a confusing effect in the Mahathir camp. It's first response was of self-confidence and complacency.

For some time it was hoped that the Razaleigh-Musa faction might after all desist from

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breaking the Umno tradition of not standing against the leader or after having felt the field they might not go to the extent of actually fighting the election. In case Tengku Razaleigh changed his mind the Deputy Prime Minister Encik Ghafar Baba did not declare his candidacy for the office of deputy president, keeping it available for being offered to Tengku Razaleigh.

Important victory

These fond hopes were not to be fulfilled but a long period of indecision made many Umno delegates feel that Dr Mahathir's position was assailable. The Mahathir camp had been slow to realise the seriousness of the challenge and when they did that a large number of delegates had already made up their minds and decided to be on the right side of the "winning party".

When Dr Mahathir declared that he would continue as Prime Minister even if he won the party leadership by a single vote he was trying to tell the fence-jumpers that he was not out, but it was generally taken as a sign of weakness.

So if Tengku Razaleigh was deeply shocked by his defeat by 761 to 718 votes, it was for good reason. He had not gone into this big battle without assuring himself or without being assured that he was going to win.

It has been no less important, however, for Dr Mahathir that his Deputy Prime Minister Encik Ghafar was able to defeat the incumbent deputy president Datuk Musa by 739 votes to 699. In many ways it was a more important victory than his own.

Two of the three vice-presi-

dents, incumbent Datuk Seri Wan Mokhtar Ahmad and newcomer Anwar Ibrahim were Mahathir supporters. The third vice-president (then) Defence Minister Datuk Abdullah Badawi was a Musa Hitam protege. In the party's supreme council at least 16 of the 25 seats went to Mahathir supporters.

So it is Mahathir again with a fresh and a reinforced mandate but he cannot afford to be complacent anymore. The Malay — and therefore Malaysian — politics will not be the same again. It can either be worse or better.

Apart from the unsatiated ambitions within Umno itself which had provided the fuel for this greatest infighting in contemporary Malay history, those other external and internal forces who have an interest in Malaysian instability are not going to cease fire because they have been unsuccessful in this attempt.

The scenario to destabilise the Malay power base has already been tested and proven in Sabah. The next stop could be Sarawak and the next ... Kuala Lumpur.

Reconciliation

The wounds created by the recent events would need to be healed through an active policy of reconciliation, but reconciliation at the grassroots as distinct from appeasement at the upper echelons where you shut your eyes to the corruption or incompetence of a person because if you touch him he will likely cause trouble to you. It should be the pruning of all deadwood at the top and reconciliation at the grassroots.

A serious disappointment with

Dr Mahathir's Prime Ministership had been his perceived inability to discipline and act against his ministerial colleagues and some top Malays who the people saw either as not competent or wanting in probity. Maybe he did not think he had sufficient means to do a full-scale cleaning job and if that was so then his contested reelection as party leader should be seen as immensely strengthening Dr Mahathir's hands for taking credible corrective and reformative measures.

One of the most important lessons of the recent crisis was about the openness of Government. People were bound to harbour their doubts and misgivings when they heard stories about, for example, the national car project, the Penang bridge, the Dayabumi complex or the Memali incident.

Eventually the Government de-classified these "secrets" and evidently it did greatly help to dispel doubts and restore credibility, but Malaysia would have been saved all that scandal-mongering if, as a policy, the facts had been shared with the people. Secrecy in public administration breeds its own scandals.

However, there is a lot more to be done in order to steer the country in what looks like turbulent waters ahead. If the recent Umno crisis helps to bring about self-critical review of policies and policy assumptions then it would have been a blessing in disguise. The challenges facing Malaysia are of a unique nature and require a great deal of rethinking both as to premises and methods. — From *Impact*, a London-based Muslim magazine.