

## Malaysia

## Surgical strike

FROM OUR SOUTH-EAST ASIA CORRESPONDENT

DR MAHATHIR Mohamad, the prime minister of Malaysia, has never been afraid to gamble. In August 1986, when Malaysia was suffering from recession, unemployment and corruption, he nonetheless called an early general election—and won a decisive victory. Now he is gambling again. He has invoked the Internal Security Act to imprison without trial, and for undefined periods, more than 90 people. What is he trying to win this time?

The doctor has a straightforward explanation for the arrests that began last month: he wanted to avoid racial conflict between the Malay half of the country's 16m people and the third of them who are of Chinese descent. For that purpose, he has authorised the arrest of dozens of people of all political persuasions, and banned a rally planned for November 1st which was expected to bring as many as 500,000 Malays to a small stadium on the edge of a Chinese district of Kuala Lumpur.

His critics say he is simply putting down any form of opposition—and perhaps preparing to declare a state of emergency. They note that most of the detainees are Chinese, and that many of the remainder are Muslim fundamentalists or non-partisan lobbyists

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for social and environmental causes. Only a handful of those detained are from Dr Mahathir's United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the leading party in the 13-party coalition government. That handful represents the strong anti-Mahathir faction in the party.

Dr Mahathir's enemies come in several guises. Their taunts can usually be made to bear a racial interpretation. The leader of the Chinese-dominated Democratic Action party, Mr Lim Kit Siang, accuses the government of filling Malay pockets by giving contracts to businesses owned by the prime minister's party. Last month he got the government to admit that the winner of a motorway contract was a firm linked to UMNO.

The prime minister's critics in his own party say he is soft-peddling his commitment to the Malays in order to mollify the Chinese and attract foreign investors. The fundamentalist Islam party says he has become less keen on Islam for the same reason. Inevitably, almost every politician is tempted to become a chauvinist on behalf of his own group, simply to maintain his communal support. Mr Lee Kim Sai, the coalition's labour minister and deputy leader of the Malaysian Chinese Association, has outraged UMNO by opposing the appoint-

ment to Chinese schools of teachers who cannot speak Mandarin. Wisely, Mr Lee was out of the country during the wave of arrests.

What happens next? Racial harmony in Malaysia, it has long been assumed, needs a coalition that includes representatives of all racial groups. But UMNO is so dominant that the non-Malay groups depend on its goodwill. When it becomes capricious, as it often does because it contains several factions and because some of its members resent Dr Mahathir's aggressive brand of leadership, racial fears are bound to rise.

Without doubt, Dr Mahathir's use of the security act has lowered the racial temperature (hence the approval from Singapore, Malaysia's Chinese-dominated neighbour). But tension within UMNO, and the temptation for politicians to exploit it on racial grounds, may soon rise again. Dr Mahathir will shortly face a court challenge from 11 opponents inside the party. They seek a ruling that the party election last April, which kept Dr Mahathir in the leadership by a narrow margin, was invalid. If the court agrees, it might order a re-run. This time the doctor might lose, and thus be deposed as prime minister. That, though, is just an hypothesis.

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