

MALAYSIA

P.P. - UMNO

## Another Feat for the Escape Artist

*Mahathir manages to confound his opponents—again*

**A**dmirers have called him a Houdini for his renowned ability to slip out of risky political situations. Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, 62, has had to display that talent often in the past ten months. Last April he narrowly survived a leadership fight within his own party, holding on to the organization's presidency by a margin of only 43 votes. In October he staged a crackdown on dissent that caused critics to charge that democratic Malaysia had become an authoritarian state. Last week Mahathir, still in full control, was basking in the results of his most dramatic political escape trick ever. Challenged in his leadership of the Unit-

ed Malays National Organization, he outmaneuvered his enemies as a result of a decision by a High Court judge—who astonished government and opposition alike by ordering the dissolution of U.M.N.O., the country's largest party, which has dominated every Malaysian government since 1957.

The impetus for the surprise decision came from a lawsuit filed last year by eleven of Mahathir's opponents within the party. The suit challenged the result of U.M.N.O.'s April election, which Mahathir had won with only 761 of 1,479 votes cast. His opponents sued to have the results invalidated. They argued that 30 of the party's branches had never been legally chartered by the government, as required by law. If the dissidents had succeeded, Mahathir would have faced an election rerun—and risked a possible defeat.

Two weeks ago, High Court Justice

Harun Hashim, a respected jurist who has served on the bench since 1971, delivered a bombshell judgment. "Very sadly," he declared in a gravel voice, "I have to make a finding . . . that U.M.N.O. was an unlawful society." Harun's reasoning: because those 30 party branches had failed to follow legal procedures, the whole party was "a nullity all the way." In effect, the party was declared invalid and in need of reconstitution, but Mahathir's position as head of government in a 13-party coalition remained unaffected. The other twelve parties in the coalition, dominated until now by U.M.N.O., quickly reaffirmed their support of the Prime Minister.

By declaring U.M.N.O. legally nonexistent, Harun's decision had the immediate effect of disarming Mahathir's opponents. That obviously caused the Prime Minister, who has held power since 1981, little unhappiness. At a press conference he quoted a Malay proverb, "A drop of indigo spoils a whole potful of milk," to make the point that through their troublemaking, the dissidents had destroyed the party. The task of creating a new version of U.M.N.O. under his control did not strike Mahathir as particularly daunting. Said he: "The problem is not so difficult that it cannot be solved. It is a technical matter. Our future is very bright indeed."

Outside U.M.N.O., however, Mahathir's popularity is limited, especially among the ethnic Chinese, who make up 5 million of Malaysia's 16 million people. The crackdown that Mahathir initiated in October was aimed largely at the Chinese

community, which had become restive over a government decision to appoint officials untrained in the Mandarin dialect as administrators for Chinese primary schools. The Chinese saw the change in school policy as an attack on their cultural heritage and further evidence of the pro-Malay, anti-Chinese bias of the Mahathir government. The Prime Minister had previously vowed that 30% of the nation's corporate wealth would be in the hands of Malays—and thus not in the hands of the Chinese—by 1990, and he has a long way to go to achieve that goal. As the October crackdown continued, Mahathir closed three newspapers and locked up 106 of the country's leading opposition figures and social activists under a preventive-detention law; 33 are still behind bars.

Mahathir's strong-arm tactics led the country's elder statesman, former Prime Minister Abdul Rahman, to declare in an interview with London's *Financial Times* that the current leader had turned Malaysia into a police state and was "setting himself up as a permanent dictator." Today, civil liberties and press freedom in Malaysia remained curtailed. Newspapers and magazines are prohibited from publishing "false news," which amounts to anything that the government says could inspire public alarm. TV and radio are state controlled, and political rallies are banned.

**S**o far, Mahathir claims to retain the support of the country's Malay majority. But that group's future loyalty will depend in large measure on the government's ability to assure prosperity and opportunity. Malaysia remains the world's largest producer of tin, rubber and palm oil. The economy seems to be recovering from a modest slump, but is not likely to regain the 7% to 8% growth rates of the 1970s and early 1980s. Unemployment has risen to 10% and is expected to reach 12% by 1990. For its part, the relatively affluent Chinese minority wonders whether it should make further investments in Malaysian enterprises or send more of its capital abroad. "People are silent, not complacent," says a Chinese entrepreneur. "They are wondering how long we'll be stuck with this man."

As far as Mahathir is concerned, quite a while. "No one wants to invest in a country that is so democratic that demonstrations occur every day and the government falls every two months," he told the 177-member Malaysian parliament late last year. "The government does not have to be liberal to those who don't appreciate it. Being liberal to them is like offering a flower to a monkey. The monkey would rather tear the flower apart than appreciate its beauty." After his latest political feat, Mahathir seems less inclined than ever to relinquish his grip on the blossom of power.

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