

# Mahathir meets the people

A by-election victory and a rally bolster his rule

By Suhaini Aznam in Kuala Lumpur

Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Mahathir Mohamad went to the people twice in the space of four days and — at least on the face of it — came up with the support he wanted, if in a rather qualified form. On 5 March, the newly reconstituted United Malays National Organisation (Umno Baru) won the keenly fought, Tanjung Puteri by-election in Johor, defeating the small opposition Partai Socialis Rakyat Malaysia (PSRM) by a paper-thin 31-vote margin after two recounts.

The voter turnout of 58.9% was unusually low even for a by-election. Some 67% had turned out in the previous voting in 1986, and both parties understood that a low Malay turnout meant disaffection with Umno and a low Chinese turnout meant a set-back for the PSRM.

Victory was crucial to the new party

— the dominant group in the ruling National Front coalition — being its first test at the polls since the dramatic court decision on 4 February to declare the former party an illegal society. But the Umno Baru candidate Datuk Yunos Sulaiman's margin of victory was even smaller than in 1986 when he won by 506 votes against the same PSRM candidate, local lawyer Abdul Razak Ahmad, in a three-cornered fight. Razak challenged the earlier result and, on 24 January, the High Court ruled the election null because of lapses in election procedure.

This time, the results were only announced at 4 a.m. — after the ballots were counted three times. The first count gave Yunos a 40-vote victory. The returning officer did not announce the results of the second count, merely saying that slight discrepancies necessitated a recount and, finally, the third

count was arrived at, giving Yunos 10,181 votes to Razak's 10,150. The PSRM has filed a complaint with the Election Commission and, depending on its response, may seek legal redress.

By contrast, Mahathir's visit to Kelantan on 6 March was more of a public relations drive, at which he launched the *Semarak* movement, the Bahasa Malaysia acronym for a government-initiated "Loyalty with the People" movement to bring leaders and people together in their common goal of national prosperity. Following tradition, Mahathir helped carry a wooden village house to its new location and then presented it to a widow.

The state by-election and the scene of the visit were significant in that both were bastions of Mahathir's own politi-

cal rivals in Umno. Johor is the base of former deputy prime minister Datuk Musa Hitam, and the Malay voters' mood was considered fairly indicative of how far the state party was willing to reconcile itself to the recent purge of Musa allies from Mahathir's new party line-up. Musa, who turned out to campaign for Umno Baru, has conspicuously not joined Tunku Razaleigh Hamzah in the latter's effort to form a rival party to Mahathir's.

Observers were even more curious to see the reception Mahathir received in Kelantan — home ground of Razaleigh, who had challenged Mahathir for the Umno leadership last April and who had invited Malaysia's first prime minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, to try to form a new party when the old Umno was declared unlawful. Mahathir not only dropped Razaleigh's allies from the new party

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line-up but, on 7 March, also said that those involved in the suit challenging the April Umno election results, those who refused to accept the results and those working against the formation of Umno Baru would be refused even ordinary membership.

Presumably, Razaleigh is among those barred, though the prime minister did not say so specifically.

The crowds in Kelantan gave Mahathir an elaborate welcome complete with ceremonial trays of saffron rice and gold leaf. Mahathir was presented with a red warrior's head-dress, and his wife adopted as *Ibu*, literally mother — a term of affection and respect. Ironically, given the aim of the *Semarak* campaign, the presence of riot police kept the ordinary folk and their leaders apart. Security was essential given the rumours, alluded to by Mahathir himself, that his life was in danger in Kelantan.

Yet another rumour making the rounds was that the Sultan of Kelantan — a relative of Razaleigh — would officiate at another gathering at about the same time as Mahathir's, purportedly to see where his executive councillors owed their allegiance. Dismissing the rumour as untrue, a Kelantan politician suggested that this was probably the Kelantanese way of at least hinting at reluctance to attend Mahathir's rally without actually boycotting it.

At the rally, Kelantan chief minister Datuk Mohamed Yaacob, a Mahathir appointee, took on Razaleigh's allies in the Kelantan state assembly when he brought up the opposition Parti Islam's (Pas) plan to introduce a no-confidence motion in himself as leader of the state legislature.

**T**he Pas move is an obvious challenge by proxy. Of the 26 Umno assemblymen from the total of 39, more than half are said to support Razaleigh. The opposition Democratic Action Party, which is predominantly Chinese, called for an emergency sitting of the federal parliament in February also to press for a no-confidence motion. This was hastily countered by a mass, televised pledge of loyalty to Mahathir — organised by the Umno backbenchers' club — of all National Front MPs to preempt defections.

Even as Tanjung Puteri tested Johor Malays' feelings towards Umno Baru, the new party also tested the loyalty of Musa's allies. The National Front director of operations was none other than Johor Baru MP Datuk Shahrir Samad, a

staunch and vocal Musa ally. Yet Shahrir realised that whichever way the election went, he stood to lose. If he delivered, Mahathir would get the credit. If they lost, he and his team would be accused of sabotage or, at least, blamed for not working hard enough.

The importance of the by-election to Umno Baru was heightened by Mahathir himself flying in for half a day, delivering three speeches by nightfall — an unusually high profile presence for a prime minister at a state by-election. Some Johor Umno campaigners were worried that Mahathir's flying visit would do more harm than good because it would focus local Malay attention on the Umno split. They had purposely kept the campaign localised and low-key. Perhaps taking the cue, Mahathir himself stuck to local housing and education issues and barely alluded to Umno's own recent problems.

But the cracks in the party were obvious. Shahrir was conspicuously absent at the airport rally to welcome

BERNAMA Mahathir, though he joined Mahathir later when the latter officially opened a group of four-year-old flats. But that night, Shahrir was again absent at a Chinese New Year dinner where Mahathir was guest of honour.

Tanjung Puteri is an urban, working-to-middle-class constituency, divided between 51.1% Malay voters, 42.4% Chinese and 6.2% Indians. Razak, a popular local lawyer with a grassroots touch, has had a record of voicing working-class complaints and fighting against municipal red tape. Yet it was the PSRM, without a single parliamentary seat, which brought up such national issues as poverty, corruption and last October's mass detentions, while National Front campaigners spoke of clogged drains and the commercial prospects of selling more fried noodles to Singaporean tourists.

Tellingly, the only wider issue of relevance on which Razak remained silent was the basic platform of his party, socialism, by tradition a difficult concept to sell in Malaysia with its feudal roots and capitalist ambitions. Razak's Achilles heel, however, was his demonstration in November 1986, when he lay on the railway tracks in protest against Israeli President Chaim Herzog's visit to neighbouring Singapore. Umno too had protested against the visit, but not as dramatically, and now that Malaysia and Singapore are coming closer again, Umno was keen to paint Razak as anti-Singaporean, knowing that Razak depended on local Chinese votes. **■**