

Shaking Up the System

Seven years ago Mahathir Mohamad assumed the leadership of Malaysia's dominant political party, the United Malays National Organisation, and the premiership that goes with it. Almost immediately, he served notice that the tradition-bound country would never be the same. Charged with a reformist zeal, Mahathir promoted industrialisation, promised a more efficient civil service and urged his countrymen to work harder. Most Malaysians welcomed his administrative style, though some found it abrasive. Since then, much of the shine has worn off, particularly in the face of the political turbulence that has been rocking the country over the past twelve months. To ride it out, Mahathir has again turned to what seems to be his political motto: if you want to beat the system, change it.

At a recent meeting of his associates in northeastern Kelantan State, Mahathir, 62, announced that "whatever we do, we must try to minimise politics in the party and the country." In a country that seems to live and breathe politics, that is a tall order. Politics is entrenched in every facet

of society, from business to education and culture. Political parties abound, most drawing support along racial, religious or regional lines. UMNO, the dominant group

since independence in 1957, was seen as the protector of the ethnic Malays, who make up just under half of the country's 16 million people. It has also been the party most racked by internal squabbling as positions in UMNO have long been equated with power in government and advantages in business.

But the message to "depoliticise" Malaysia has been repeated up and down the country. "The consensus at the top is that we can ill-afford the luxury of over-politicisation," says Youth & Sports Minister Najib Razak. Mahathir's opponents say the new policy is meant to stifle dissent. Huffs lawyer Marina Yusoff, a sharp critic of the administration: "By harping on this tune Mahathir is tampering with our tradition of grass roots democracy. The opposite of grass roots democracy is dictatorship."

In many ways, politics Malaysian-style has already changed a great deal. During UMNO's party polls in April last year, the incumbent president was seriously challenged for the first time. Mahathir's narrow victory over former trade & indus-

try minister Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, 51, left the party badly divided. The bruising election battle set off a chain of unprecedented events. A writ challenging its results on the grounds that some of the electors were unlawful delegates led the Kuala Lumpur High Court to rule in February that UMNO itself was unlawful. Both Mahathir and Razaleigh tried to form new parties. The first application was submitted by Razaleigh's supporters; it was rejected by the Registrar of Societies on the grounds that the old UMNO had not yet been de-registered. The PM's application was approved; his new party is known as UMNO Baru.

Several Mahathir associates who have spoken to Asiaweek in recent weeks say the PM has been seriously considering key changes in UMNO Baru's constitution, which is similar to UMNO's at the moment. They would alter the way the party elects its national leadership, cut down politicking and reduce money politics whereby influence pedlars are able to buy support for themselves using the current electoral system.

Probably the most controversial and far-reaching proposal is to have nominated rather than elected chiefs of the 133 divisions so the leadership has a firmer grip on the grass roots machinery. UMNO's divisions, which are drawn around the boundaries of parliamentary constituencies, formed the backbone of the party's machinery during general elections. Analysts say tampering with the system could lead to disaster at the polls. Division leaders nominate candidates for general elections, though national executives call the final shots. Comments a former UMNO leader: "If you have two leaders in a division, one popular but out of favour, the other a nominated chief but with little grass roots backing, the party's machinery wouldn't be half as effective as before. Even safe seats wouldn't be so safe."

Another key proposal is to do away with the biennial election of UMNO's radical Youth wing. UMNO Youth leaders have in the past taken a more aggressive Malay nationalist line, particularly as a campaign posture before Youth wing elections.

Last October, by Mahathir's own admission, the country was on the verge of a major race riot after UMNO Youth leaders sparked Malay fervour against the Chinese-based opposition Democratic Action Party and Chinese educationists over the issue of Chinese-trained teachers. A total of 118 people, including numerous DAP MPs and three UMNO Youth leaders, were detained under the Internal Security Act, which provides for indefinite detention without trial; 49 are still being held. "There is a feeling that we should learn a lesson from the events of last October,"

says one Mahathir associate, "and end the practice of having an elected Youth leader." For their part, Mahathir's opponents say the Youth wing has in the past played the role of a pressure group within the party and the scrapping of its elections would pave the way for the PM to appoint a compliant Youth leader.

Yet another proposal is to reduce the number of delegates eligible to attend the party's assembly. But a smaller electoral college, say Mahathir's critics, would only increase money politics. "There would be less people to buy off," says one. Another proposal is to conduct leadership elections at division level once delegates allied to candidates have been chosen, instead of bringing the delegates up to Kuala Lumpur to vote where shortly before the ballot they can be offered enticements. Other proposals include the bunching up of branch, division and national elections triennially, thus reducing grass roots politicking in the intervening years.

Even its most strident critics concede that whatever its faults, the old UMNO practised true grass roots democracy. Its more than 8,000 branches were spread throughout the length and breadth of peninsular Malaysia plus Labuan Island off the East Malaysian state of Sabah. Every year UMNO branches would elect their leaders who, in turn, were able to elect the leadership of the 133 divisions once every two years. Eleven delegates from each division elected in turn the party's national leadership once every three years. "We are proud that our system has been one of the most democratic not only in Malaysia but perhaps one of the most democratic in Asia," says Abdullah Badawi, a vice-president in the old UMNO and a member of UMNO Baru's *pro tempore* committee.

Of the 1,479 divisional delegates eligible to vote at last April's triennial election, 761, or 51.4%, voted for Mahathir and 718, or 48.5%, voted for Razaleigh. The narrow margin, says one political analyst, "showed not only how much support Razaleigh had but the extent of anti-establishment feelings on the ground." As a conservative party with well-entrenched grass roots leaders, the turnover in delegates every two years is comparatively small. "In other words, a fellow who obtains 49% of the votes is almost guaranteed to get a good proportion of that in a re-match," explains one former UMNO leader. Before the Feb. 4 court verdict declaring UMNO illegal, most analysts had predicted an eventual re-match between Mahathir and Razaleigh with a very close vote again.

Mahathir has publicly announced that he will not admit at least 100 of his most vocal opponents into his new party. That list includes Razaleigh and many of his key supporters. Razaleigh's associates

say their mentor was forced to form a new party not only because of the void left by the dissolution of UMNO but to forestall Mahathir from keeping them out of any organisation he might put together. The PM eventually used that as proof that Razaleigh and his supporters were, as he described them, "traitors." He has said that those who were not loyal to the leaders of the old party cannot become members of the new one. Razaleigh's aides read the move as intolerance. "He wants to remove anyone who can threaten his leadership," says former information minister Rais Yatim. "He wants to avoid a contest in his own party because he isn't sure he can win again."

The old UMNO had some 1.4 million registered members. The new UMNO has just begun the lengthy process of re-registering them. UMNO Baru officials say it will take at least eighteen months. An election at national level within UMNO Baru is unlikely before the second half of 1990.

Currently the party has only 35 members — 34 from its pro-tem committee — plus Yunus Sulaiman, who three weeks ago narrowly won a by-election in southern Johore State. The party has just finalised the list of 133 people who would head the party's divisions. At least 24 supporters of Razaleigh and his April running-mate, former deputy prime minister Musa Hitam, have been excluded from the initial list. Party insiders say that at least six more would be excluded from the final list.

UMNO Baru is also in the process of finalising the names of 1,330 people — ten from each division — who would be members of their division committees. These are grass roots leaders who make up the electoral college that elects the party's leadership and influences party politics at state and constituency levels. By removing nearly a third of the prominent grass roots leaders from mainstream party politics, Mahathir's opponents say the PM is trying to ensure that there is little support from grass roots leaders for any challenger.

Mahathir's aides insist there are no machiavellian motives behind the plans. In recent weeks the PM and his supporters have compared Malaysia's passion for politics with the quieter political atmosphere in neighbouring Singapore and Indonesia. "Mahathir's thinking is that if we have as much politics in UMNO as Singapore's People's Action Party or Indonesia's Golkar, we can spend the time we save from internal political bickering on economic development," says pro-Mahathir MP Abdullah Ahmed. "We don't want to be like Golkar or the PAP, but we need to slow down for our own good." Adds another Mahathir supporter: "We want to get on with the job of running the government." ■