

No dilemma about Mahathir's direction

(P)

Power to the centre

MAHATHIR

By Phillip Bowring in Kuala Lumpur

For the past year, Malaysia has been battered by news (see box). Dramatic political developments have followed so fast upon each other that Malaysians have had little time to assess the impact of one before being engulfed by the next. To get a picture of the forest rather than the trees is even more difficult.

Is it all just politics as usual at a higher pitch — as political combatants in a traditionally open and plural society set about each other? Or do recent events add up to a change in the name of the game?

Has a major shift taken place in the way politics is conducted? If so, what are the likely consequences for Malaysian institutions, for race relations, for the economy? Are changes a reflection primarily of the prime minister's outlook and personality? Or are they a consequence of more fundamental changes in society?

The one thing that most of the recent events have in common is that they are either challenges to Datuk Seri Mahathir Mohamad — whether as leader of the United Malays National Organisation (Umno) or as prime minister — or responses to that challenge. A year ago, Mahathir was hanging on to power by his fingertips. The question was: how much longer could he last? The questions now are: who can stop him? How long will he want to stay on?

He has turned adversity to advantage, meeting each challenge by raising the stakes, using the executive powers at the disposal of a prime minister to change the rules to the disadvantage of his opponents.

The net result of the past year is that Mahathir has greatly strengthened his grip on the party. The party has strengthened its grip both on the ruling National Front coalition and on the bureaucratic machinery. And the central government has increased its power relative to the courts, the state governments and assorted institutions including the press.

Taken in isolation, each of Mahathir's steps may be seen simply as a response to a particular predicament. But the consistent way in which he has reacted to challenges has convinced many, admirers and critics alike, that he wants to change Malaysian society and institutions more than many had suspected. He is neither the amateur patrician politician after the style of his predecessor, Tun Hussein Onn, nor the consummate master of the politics of

feudalism and money patronage, as is his arch rival, former finance minister Tunku Razaleigh Hamzah.

Instead, his is the politics of centralisation; of party, federal and bureaucratic power. His immediate aim: cohesion and executive efficiency through curbing checks and balances, and eliminating unnecessary intermediaries. The ultimate aim: the creation of a centralised state with a strong (Malay) bourgeoisie along East Asian lines.

If Mahathir has not expressed this in so many words, his attitudes come through in his book, *The Malay Dilemma*, his Look East policy, and his admiration for Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew and the People's Action Party (PAP) in Singapore. His is a national vision, and he has no patience with "muddling through," even less with institutions derived from colonial times which might stand in the way of his perceptions of Malay and national goals.

Most likely he would appreciate the comparison with Lee but perhaps not with the comparison which others sometimes make between him and Ferdinand Marcos of the Philippines and Sukarno of Indonesia in their middle years — before corruption in one case and personality cult in the other overshadowed the goal of replacing political and ideological bickering with centralised, national leadership.

But Malaysia is not Indonesia or the Philippines. Even less is it Singapore or South Korea. It is a relatively prosperous, multi-ethnic society, with a large middle class and a specialised, outward-looking economy. Many doubt whether, over the medium term, a more authoritarian government system, however clear its national concepts, will help either multi-racialism or development.

There are many who say that Mahathir is not as authoritarian as his critics maintain. They argue that Umno has always, with the exception of Hussein, had authoritarian leaders who have expelled those who have challenged them — as Mahathir and his former deputy, Datuk Musa Hitam, found in 1969 when they bitterly criticised the then prime minister Tunku Abdul Rahman for neglecting the economic advancement of the Malays.

There is one evident, if very superficial, difference with previous Umno leaders, who were all lawyers and thus accustomed to debate and compromise. Mahathir is a medical doctor, believing in scientific precision and unaccustomed to having his patients dispute his diagnosis. This amalgam of science and theories of social behaviour came through strongly in *The Malay Dilemma*, in which he described Malays as

less capable than Chinese because they were accustomed to an easy environment in which even the weak could survive.

He represents one side of the Malay "dilemma," which he described as between the Malays' "desire to assert their rights and arrogate to themselves what they consider to be theirs, and the overwhelming desire to be polite, courteous and thoughtful of the rights and demands of others."

Whatever the character of the leader, Umno may never have been quite the populist, democratic grass-roots organisation of its own mythology. Many describe it as semi-feudal in origin. It has been sustained partly by modern forms of patronage as well as by Malay gut appreciation of the necessity for political unity.

This is the strongest card in Mahathir's hand in dealing with Razaleigh.

Having outmanoeuvred him in the murky backdoor plays over party registration, Mahathir now has him outside the party. Only Razaleigh's most ardent supporters believe that many Malays are going to vote for a party opposing Umno, even if they do not think much of the present leadership.

The problem of Malay instinct for one party (whatever the dissension within it) has forever frustrated the Malay and Muslim-based Parti Islam (Pas), which advocates, among other things, the setting up of an Islamic state.

The best Razaleigh may be able to hope for is to use personal loyalties to himself (especially in his home state of Kelantan) and his associates to expose the dangers of continuing disunity for Malays and thus force Mahathir to a compromise. Abstentions at the polls, such as the low 58.9% voter turnout in a

5 March state by-election in Johor, could undermine the hold not only of Umno on the Malays but also further weaken Chinese support for its National Front coalition partners. But for Razaleigh to court a repeat of the 1969 election (in which the Malay and Chinese vote were so badly split and the government's hold on power so tenuous that racial riots ensued) might not endear him to anyone. Meanwhile, it is Mahathir who can determine the timing of national elections.

All told, it is not a very promising situation for opponents and explains why Musa and some of his lieutenants were so quick to give their allegiance to Mahathir's Umno (Baru). To the disappointment of some followers, they did not have the stomach to continue a fight which they would likely lose. They opted to wait and try to fight another day.

But even that may not be easy. Mahathir is believed to want to take this opportunity to revamp the party structure, to make it more centralised, more efficient and more beholden to the leadership. Already the president enjoys considerable powers — the nomination of the state chief ministers and the appointment of party liaison chiefs in the states.

Although Mahathir has promised to take into the new party all but a handful of Razaleigh supporters, in practice this may take quite a while, with some applications being accepted faster than others. It is also possible that the eventual constitution of the new party will be significantly different from the old, putting more power into the hands of the president and the supreme council and generally reducing the ability of divisional and state loyalties to override the party's national direction.

Mahathir is believed to admire the tightly knit, cadre-style PAP in Singapore. Although that system cannot be transplanted to Malaysia, where Umno at the *kampung* (village) level is as much

a social institution as a political party, the promised computerisation of the membership rolls will doubtless increase central control as well as eliminate many of the phantom members said to be among the old party's list of 1.4 million.

Further strengthening Mahathir's hand is the power of state/party patronage. This has long been practised — conspicuously by Razaleigh as finance minister and, later, trade and industry minister. Now that he is out of office he will find keeping loyalties especially difficult.

There has always been a degree of interaction between party and state machineries from the top down to the *kampung* level, whether it involved the granting of trading licences or the award of public-works contracts. The politics of patronage grew dramatically during the 1970s under the twin influences of the New Economic Policy's (NEP) push to create a Malay property-owning and commercial class and the buoyancy of government revenues thanks to the oil boom. In theory it might have been expected to flatten out in recent years as government spending has had to be curtailed and more emphasis placed on private-sector initiative, but it has not quite worked like that for two reasons.

Senior civil servants say there has been a gradual encroachment by politicians into areas of decision-making previously the domain of civil servants. There is also reported to be a growing tendency to make civil service appointments on the basis of political or personal loyalties rather than on professional merit. It is debatable whether or not Umno rivalries have contributed to politicisation. Nor is it universally agreed as being a bad thing.

Mahathir's defenders point to the close links between the ruling Liberal Democratic Party and the bureaucracy in Japan and the direct sway of the political leadership over the bureaucracy in South Korea. The analogies may be useful but the bureaucracy has a will of its own in Japan which even the most powerful leaders find hard to combat. This is not the case in Malaysia.

Mahathir is a hands-on prime minister. Many say his direct interest in many issues that earlier prime ministers would have left to individual ministers has speeded up decision-making and implementation. But critics argue that it has also meant sometimes hasty commitment to ill-thought-out projects

from which there can be no retreat because of Mahathir's involvement, and overtly political overruling of departmental advice. Mahathir does allow cabinet ministers an opportunity to speak out in cabinet — but it is a moot point how many would have the courage to argue against him in any case.

Another reason for the continued expansion of the money-politics nexus has been the growth of the overt commercial activities of the leading political parties, Umno and its main partner in the coalition, the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), and the expansion of apparently private-sector corporations which owe their existence to state patronage and loans from state-owned banks. In some cases they are incorporated subsidiaries and associates of statutory bodies. Former auditor-general Tan Sri Ahmad Noordin Zakaria, an old-fashioned believer in the separation of powers, tried to increase public accountability in this area. He failed.

Whatever the reason, there is no doubt that it has become so deeply ingrained that it is barely worthy of notice. One minister will condemn it while claiming it to be an inevitable part of a democratic society. Another will condemn and seek to silence those who try to probe its abuses, citing grounds ranging from nationalism to anti-communism and anti-communalism.

It is of course possible that any centralisation of power by Mahathir, particularly a tighter grip on the party, will eliminate much money politics. But for the moment, that is seen more as a pious hope for the future than a natural outcome of Mahathir's years at the helm.

Nor should the extent of his grip be exaggerated. He is not a Lee Kuan Yew or Suharto. He is 62 and the party does not lack for ambitious younger men — even if the quality of the cabinet, with the exception perhaps of Education Minister Ahwar Ibrahim, has suffered badly from party splits. Political debts

now owed to some younger supporters may make it difficult for Mahathir to come to an accommodation with the Musa group. Even prime ministers do not have unlimited powers to bestow office.

Few have any idea how long Mahathir, given the chance, would like to stay. Some believe he would be content to leave after winning another election — which he must hold by 1991 — and ensuring that the office passes to a person of his choice. However, some Umno leaders have said recently that long tenure has

its benefits; that it can bring stability. They have pointed to Lee, to Britain's Margaret Thatcher, to Indonesia's Suharto. Mahathir was a late starter in the top office — he took over when he was 56 — but he is very fit for his years and the most talented of the next generation still in government, Anwar, is still very young at 40. So it is not altogether impossible, as might have been thought a year ago, that Mahathir could be around for another 10 years.

There are few apparent dangers to Mahathir from within his new party unless the economy turns really bad and unemployment, particularly among graduates, worsens. He has been lucky this past year with sharp upturns in rubber and palm-oil prices just when they were needed. But having survived a rough two years, it would now take a prolonged period of economic malaise to pose a political threat.

The prospect of a tighter knit, more centralised Umno continuing to be led by a man as purposeful as Mahathir worries many non-Malays as well as his critics, covert and open, in Umno. Many think the survival of Malaysia's spirited democracy is substantially due to Umno's own internal democratic traditions, reflected in feisty electoral contests and battles over personalities and positions. If there is to be less room for dissent within Umno there is going to be even less scope for dissent outside it.

In the short run, many non-Malays are attracted by the prospect of less high-decibel politics. Some non-Malays may have been rather smug last year about Umno's troubles after their own discomfiture at the scandals and divisions within the MCA, but in their more reflective moments they tend to see that Malay disunity is more a danger than an opportunity as it makes extremist plays for Malay support more likely. Many, in fact, now see a direct connection be-

tween the Umno split and the upsurge of communal politics which was given as the reason for the wave of arrests under the Internal Security Act (ISA) beginning in October last year.

So in the short term, too much political competition can be a threat to the minorities. Yet the alternative is probably worse. It is the arithmetic — however distorted by constituency size and boundary demarcation — of parliamentary democracy which requires that non-bumiputras (non-indigenous Malaysians) get a share of political power and a forum for their grievances.

This process may have been seriously undermined by the ISA detentions. Whatever the immediate justification for detentions to spike the apparent build-up of communal tensions, the long-term detentions meted out to opposition members of parliament and to environmental and other social critics represented a major extension of the use of the ISA.

That is not to say it has not been used for political purposes which appeared to have little to do with national security. It was used by Ghazali Shafie, when home minister under Tun Hussein Onn, to put away Abdullah Ahmad, once political secretary to the previous prime minister and at the time a deputy minister, on the flimsiest evidence of communist sympathies in 1976. It was used against significant numbers of people after the 1969 riots and during Indonesia's Confrontation with Malaysia in the early 1960s.

But the recent exercise is the first time the ISA has been used to detain so many sitting opposition MPs at the same time. And the first time that arrests had covered such a broad spectrum of opponents and critics rather than being aimed at one specific threat to security.

Apart from the excessive use of the ISA, democratic process is clearly threatened when criticism of government is, by extension, taken to mean criticism of "Malay supremacy." The current information minister, Datuk Mohamed Rahmat, argued at the time of the debate on the amendments to the Official Secrets Act (OSA) in 1986 that as the government was Malay-led, opposition to the OSA could be "viewed as an excuse to challenge the Malay leadership and the Malays themselves."

It is not just the opposition Democratic Action Party (DAP) and Pas which wonder how democracy can be sustained if MPs are so readily subject to ISA detention and all criticism translated into ethnic terms. The MCA, it appears, is almost as concerned. While it is still trying to recover from its own divisions and financial scandals, the DAP, its main rival for Chinese votes, is acquiring martyr status.

The MCA knows it has little power

to influence major government decisions until it can show Umno that it is respected and can deliver votes. But delivering votes becomes all the more difficult when the party appears to have so little clout in government. Occasional chauvinistic outbursts, such as that by Labour Minister and party deputy president Lee Kim Sai on the education issue last year, may win temporary Chinese applause, but they tend to backfire because they increase Malay suspicions of MCA objectives, create issues for Malay chauvinism and thus reduce its ability to influence government.

Being in favour of the principle of the ISA and being part of the government, the MCA is in no position to oppose particular detentions, however unjustified they may seem, and however it may damage them politically.

The erosion of the MCA's role in government has been going on for years, partly as a result of the calibre of leadership, partly perhaps as a result of Umno's unwillingness to yield any major portfolios to the MCA since the late Tun Tan Siew Sin stepped down as finance minister in 1974. Indeed the concept of the National Front — which aimed to provide some political crumbs for minorities in the context of controlled communal politics — has been withering slowly. Once it was possible for an individual to become a direct member of the National Front's predecessor, the Alliance, thus avoiding communal identification. The National Front makes no such provision.

Yet the events of the past year have suggested that communal politics for the minorities may be a dead end. While complaining that the nation is drifting away from multi-racialism, the MCA remains stuck in its communal ghetto, with no obvious commitment to democratic institutions and permanently marked by the perception that its leaders have been mainly preoccupied with financial gain.

Faced with a powerful Umno, nominally non-communal parties, such as the DAP and Gerakan (despite some close encounters with money politics), may look like more promising institutions, recognising that non-Malays — and some urban middle-class Malays — share objectives and values which go beyond attachments to Chinese schools and lion dances. Indeed, the list of people detained under the ISA suggests to some that the government may be more concerned about the emergence

of new coalitions of opponents than by traditional ones.

Mahathir's tough stance against assorted dissidents has been facilitated by similar policies in Singapore. Increased cross-Causeway cooperation has been seen in some recent ISA detentions and reflected in the appointment of former Singapore intelligence chief S. R. Nathan as high commissioner in Kuala Lumpur.

The ISA detentions exhibited the personal power of the prime minister in another way. After Musa abruptly resigned from the cabinet two years ago, Mahathir himself took over the Home Ministry. This put the whole security and intelligence apparatus, headed by the police Special Branch, under his immediate aegis. A new head of Special Branch was appointed soon afterwards. Exactly where initiatives over detentions have come from — whether from Special Branch, the Home Ministry or the Inspector-General of Police (IGP) — is far from clear. But with the prime minister also being home minister there is no chance of review at a higher level.

The IGP is not a Mahathir appointee and the uniformed police are considered apolitical. But they have a direct obligation to the civilian government, and their own instinctive preference is for playing safe where law and order are concerned. Whatever the police view of the power and money plays of the politicians, they remain faithful servants of the government.

There is also a sense of rivalry with the armed forces. The last thing either police or civilian politicians want is a state of emergency — said to have been on the agenda of some Umno hotheads last year. Although an emergency gives a government huge powers to overrule other institutions it would bring the army into the equation. As one minister asked rhetorically: "Do you want to share power with the army?"

Other institutions are also being rapidly cut down to size, notably the courts. The assault on the judiciary is by far the most radical measure taken by Mahathir. When faced with judicial rebuffs, he has changed the constitution which will in effect give executive control over the judiciary, changed laws — as with the Societies Act — to stop them being used against him by his political opponents, treated court decisions with disdain (re-arresting DAP MP Karpal Singh under the ISA immediately after a court had freed him) and framing laws

to avoid the possibility of judicial discretion by giving ministers blanket powers.

Opponents see in all this not just a thirst for power but an undermining of institutions providing checks and balances. The government, however, sees — or at least claims to see — them as a logical development of national institutions based on local needs and political culture. The notion of an independent judiciary contesting the intentions of the leadership and parliament is seen as alien and divisive — a hangover from colonial times. The line between (in the jargon of political science) “the sovereignty of the people” and “the tyranny of the majority” (in this case a racial as well as parliamentary one) has always been a thin one.

And if Mahathir is now taking Malaysia firmly to one side, it may be partly a reaction to what he sees as a paralysis of government in countries such as the US where the separation of powers is taken to extremes. Partly, too, as a reaction to a Malaysian tendency — not confined to politicians — to be litigious.

There is, in fact, nothing new in Mahathir's willingness to confront established institutions. Back in 1983, after a long battle, the constitution was amended to limit the ability of the sultans to withhold assent from acts of parliament. Although the rulers' prerogative was hardly in the spirit of democracy, some saw it as a useful barrier to unfidled power of a government able, through the size of its majority, to change the constitution at will.

Since then, there has been no problem between the prime minister and the Yang di-Pertuan Agong (the king), though Tunku Abdul Rahman has criticised the personal behaviour of some members of the royal families. The position of the agong could again become a sensitive one next year when a new agong is due to be chosen. Next in line is the Sultan of Perak who is not only known to be friendly towards Razaleigh, but is a distinguished lawyer who was Lord President (the top legal office) before becoming a sultan. He is believed to have a strong distaste for Mahathir's reduction of the role of the judiciary. It is unclear whether his election could be endangered or delayed.

Mahathir's attitude to the judiciary and monarchy is paralleled by a similar one to other unelected vehicles of actual or potential dissent: the media, increasingly hemmed in by laws, licensing and political ownership; and the mostly urban middle class-based special interest groups criticising government

from a wide variety of mostly non-traditional standpoints such as the environment.

Many of these have united on specific political issues, notably fiercely criticising the amendments to the OSA in 1986, where traditional social critics like Chandra Muzaffar of the social reform movement Aliran and the environmentalist Gurmit Singh were joined by Tun Tan Siew Sin, newspaper columnist and former Umno MP Datuk Mohamed Sophe and other establishment figures.

Many of these groups may be too small to be taken seriously, and are certainly not potentially disruptive in the same way as old-style leftists or radical Muslims. Yet in some ways their implied criticism of money politics, maldistribution of wealth, corruption and abuse of executive powers may carry more weight than older ideologies. They also — a rare thing in contemporary Malaysian society — cut across racial boundaries though they are still

largely dominated by middle class non-Malays.

It might have been thought, in fact, that the new urban middle class of professionals and managers of all races could have formed a stronger basis for political cooperation. In a negative sense they do. Malays have a sufficient stake now in urban wealth to be unlikely to risk civil strife for short-term political gain. But, for whatever reason, Malays and non-Malays agree that there is no more social integration now than in the past. And among the elite there is actually less.

Despite their marginal role, the non-Malay parties will stay in government as long as there are some economic benefits and some hope of marginal influence. Mahathir can draw on the fact that whatever non-Malays may feel about the present they are readily frightened into believing that the only alternatives are far worse.

They may be concerned about the specifically Islamic (rather than simply Malay) postures adopted by Mahathir and Anwar and prefer more secularly inclined Umno leaders such as Musa and Razaleigh but the Pas alternative

would be worse. They may resent the likelihood of the continuation of the NEP well past 1990 — towards a goal of a 50% share of wealth for Malays. They may invest more abroad than at home, envy the grant of fat government contracts to those with political clout. But they know that at least the leadership believes in the merits of capitalism and the accumulation of wealth.

They may abhor the erosion of liberties, the stifling of the press, the arbitrary use of the ISA, the assault on the independence of the judiciary, even the erosion of states' rights. But given that the instruments of government are all in Malay hands, law and order and firm government may be preferable to populist politics which could get out of hand.

As one leading Umno figure put it: “The Chinese can't afford to take chances with Malay anger. And the Malays will feel insecure till they have a secure position in the economy. That's a feeling, not a percentage, so who knows how long it will take?” Uneasy peace is better than the alternatives but may not be much of a prescription for a dynamic society.

The drift away from an open society is not new. The grip on the media has been gradually tightening for years, as has that on the universities. The illiberal Societies Act amendments — attacked at the time by a broad coalition, including then Muslim Youth leader Anwar Ibrahim — date back to 1981.

But it is generally agreed that even if the trend towards authoritarianism was already established, Mahathir's personality and sense of national mission have speeded up the process.

Many see erosion of liberties as something the Malay mainstream regards as an unfortunate necessity to ensure that their political supremacy cannot be readily challenged. The non-Malay leadership is too weak, too divided or too out of sympathy with any democratic or legal processes which might stand in the way of money-making, to resist.

But if Mahathirism is to be justified by history it must reverse the drift towards racial exclusivity at home, as well as the economic drift away from foreign-trade orientation and towards domestic political objectives.

Otherwise, Malaysia by the year 2000 will not be the united, prosperous, educated nation that everyone hopes for, but a stagnant nation rent by racial suspicion that the thousands of middle class people, now emigrating each year, fear.