

Mahathir Weighs Series of Poll Setbacks

But Malaysia's Premier Still Has Many Options for Quashing Rivals

By STEPHEN DUTHIE

Special to THE ASIAN WALL STREET JOURNAL

KUALA LUMPUR — Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad and his seven-year-old administration have faced voters three times in the past 16 months. And the results haven't been very encouraging for the strong-willed premier.

In April 1987, Dr. Mahathir narrowly escaped defeat in his re-election bid for the presidency of the United Malays National Organization, the country's dominant political party until it was outlawed last February by the High Court. He beat his archrival, former Trade and Industry Minister Razaleigh Hamzah, by only 43 votes out of more than 1,400 cast, just barely retaining the premiership that customarily accompanies the top party post.

Last March, Dr. Mahathir led his New UMNO party, formed soon after old UMNO was declared illegal, in its first campaign fray, a midterm state-assembly election in Johore Bahru, the capital of Johore state. Yunus Sulaiman, the New UMNO candidate with the backing of the ruling National Front coalition, won by only 31 votes.

And last Thursday, Dr. Mahathir's candidate in a parliamentary by-election was



Mahathir Mohamad

soundly defeated by an outspoken critic of the premier, Shahrir Abdul Samad. Datuk Shahrir, a former welfare minister and old-UMNO leader who was sacked by Dr. Mahathir after the bitter party election last year, captured nearly 64% of 37,094 votes cast in the Johore Bahru by-election as an independent candidate.

"This vote was quite a blow, especially when you realize that the National Front devoted such tremendous resources and hyped (the campaign) so much," says a Western diplomat.

The election results stand in stark contrast to Dr. Mahathir's firm grasp on the government machinery, as well as his largely unchallenged leadership of Parliament and the National Front. Malaysia's redoubtable strongman, however, seems comparatively weak of late in the polling booths.

Dr. Mahathir may have inadvertently helped his rivals in making himself the central campaign issue in the Johore Bahru by-election and in future campaigns, instead of campaigning on the accomplishments of his administration. Responding to charges that he rules autocratically and refuses to brook dissent, the prime minister said in a widely publicized speech before the election that "I am not a dictator. I have my own style."

He added that even if his candidate loses the election, "I will still not change. I will continue to do what I have planned to do along with my colleagues."

In the past year, Dr. Mahathir has deftly manipulated the executive and legislative branches to undermine his political opponents, despite widespread national criticism. With the powers at his disposal, "Mahathir has until the Johore by-election outwitted his (opponents) at every stage," says a political analyst. "He has shown that the powers of a prime minister can be awesome."

Dr. Mahathir also has curbed the independence of the country's judiciary, with the sacking of its highest-ranking judge, as well as the suspension—and potential dismissal—of five other Supreme Court justices. In addition, he hastily ushered through Parliament a constitutional amendment eliminating the courts' constitutionally guaranteed role as the sole arbiter in the country's legal process. The amendment now bestows that power on Parliament.

Dr. Mahathir's move against the courts, which he had repeatedly accused of usurping Parliament's law-making privileges through successful legal challenges and judicial review, cut short a court campaign by his rivals to thwart Dr. Mahathir through legal actions and to revive UMNO's legal status. The old party's fate was sealed earlier this month when the Supreme Court, the country's highest legal tribunal and last court of appeal, upheld the lower court's ruling on UMNO's illegality.

With the court campaign quashed,
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Mahathir Considers His Options Following Series of Poll Setbacks

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Mahathir opponents closely aligned with Tunku Razaleigh and other rivals rallied behind Datuk Shahrir's re-election bid. The electoral challenge was sparked by Datuk Shahrir's resignation from Parliament July 1. (Under the law, an election for a parliamentary seat must be called within 60 days of a vacancy.)

Datuk Shahrir and his supporters had touted the challenge as the first in a series of by-elections against the prime minister's continued rule. They maintained that other parliamentarians would follow Datuk Shahrir's example in what could develop into a piecemeal national referendum on the prime minister's administration.

"We hope the outcome of this by-election will create an awareness and convince the national leadership that it is time for the national leadership to return to the right path and strive for unity and good will," Datuk Shahrir said Friday. He didn't disclose when other Mahathir rivals might resign.

One parliamentary by-election loss, however, doesn't mean Dr. Mahathir is headed for eventual collapse. His supporters and rivals, as well as independent political analysts, argue that the prime minister still has plenty of options to counter the threat of a staggered-elections challenge.

They also note that Johore Bahru - a multiethnic, urban constituency, where dislike for Dr. Mahathir runs deep - doesn't reflect the prime minister's support within rural and largely Malay strongholds. Such constituencies have long been the heart of UMNO's political power and the basis for its dominance of the National Front.

Dr. Mahathir also has plenty of time to deal with his rivals before the next general election. By law, the prime minister isn't required to hold a general election until 1991.

Unnecessary Vote?

The easiest and most apparent option available to Dr. Mahathir, politicians and analysts say, is amending the constitution and election statutes to eliminate the 60-day rule on parliamentary vacancies. Analysts note that the Singapore government, for example, is permitted to leave vacant parliamentary seats unfilled until the next general election.

Dr. Mahathir and several of his supporters had suggested during the Johore Bahru campaign that they are considering a means to prevent politically motivated by-elections.

"A by-election should only be held when the member (of Parliament) is ill, incapacitated or dead," Dr. Mahathir said last week. "However, in the case of the Johore Bahru by-election, Datuk Shahrir resigned not because of ill health but out of anger toward me and my leadership . . . This by-election was quite unnecessary."

The mere threat of halting additional by-elections may persuade Mahathir rivals not to resign. "His opponents would put themselves out on a limb, which could quickly be sawed off," says a Western diplomat, noting that the amendment could be passed to apply retroactively to fresh resignations.

Dr. Mahathir's rivals also face the possibility of being arrested for violating the Societies Act, the same legislation under which UMNO was declared illegal for harboring unregistered party branches. The threat has already been suggested by Deputy Home Affairs Minister Megat Junid Megat Ayub. (Dr. Mahathir heads the ministry.)

A provision of the act, which governs virtually all nonprofessional organizations, prohibits anyone from pursuing any activities on behalf of an illegal society, such as

old UMNO. Those convicted face a maximum three-year prison sentence, or a fine not exceeding M\$5,000 (US\$1,887), or both.

Datuk Megat Junid, a member of New UMNO's policy-making Supreme Council, noted earlier this month that many of Dr. Mahathir's rivals have been calling for the renewed legal status of the outlawed party. He said the government wouldn't tolerate the promotion of an "illegal party." He added that "this isn't a threat but a reminder to the people of the consequences if they wish to ignore this warning."

There also is widespread speculation that Dr. Mahathir may declare a national emergency, thereby suspending Parliament and all elections until the decree is lifted.

Advocates of the drastic measure, who have been urging Dr. Mahathir to consider the option, portray emergency rule as an efficient means for quelling political unrest, restoring Malay political unity and ensuring that economic gains since the 1985-86 recession aren't frittered away by political instability. They note that the national emergency declared after the May 1969 riots, in which the government estimates that 248 Malaysians were killed, set the stage for a decade of uninterrupted growth, as well as racial and political harmony.

Loyalty Sessions

On Saturday, Dr. Mahathir lashed out at his opponents, accusing them of trying to topple the government and restore a colonial style of national stewardship. He said that "if they succeed, the people will be the victims."

Speaking in his home Kedah state at one in an ongoing series of "Loyalty with the People" sessions, Dr. Mahathir added:

"We are trying to develop the country; the economy has just shown signs of recovery. But this power-crazy group has chosen this critical period to wrest power and try to topple the present leadership."

Dr. Mahathir accused his rivals of spreading "all sorts of lies" and creating "hatred for the establishment." He maintained that "we must not allow this to recur. The people must be careful because we now have a group that is so crazy for power they may do just anything."