

Peace Offering

Mahathir outflanks his rivals

Critics of Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad—and there are plenty—often label him “un-Malay” for his confrontational style in a society where courtesy and consensus are prized. Now, in a deft bit of consensus building, Mahathir has undercut his most important political opponents and may have prevented a battle that threatened to split his newly reconstituted party, the United Malays National Organization (UMNO Baru).

Mahathir's gambit was to offer Cabinet posts to onetime Trade and Industry Minister Razaleigh Hamzah and former Deputy Prime Minister Musa Hitam, the key figures in an April 1987 leadership struggle that ruptured UMNO. Though Musa rejected Mahathir's offer and Razaleigh was likely to follow suit, the surprise gesture may help the political fortunes of the Prime Minister, whose position was threatened by the rupture. Said a Western diplomat in Kuala Lumpur: “He's played his cards astutely and bounced back. The opposition is now confused.”

The crisis began when Razaleigh, backed by Musa, challenged Mahathir for the UMNO leadership last year. After Razaleigh lost by a thin margin, his backers protested the results in court on the grounds that 30 of UMNO's 8,000 branches had never been registered. In a surprise decision, the Supreme Court in February ruled that the irregularities made UMNO itself an unlawful society.

Mahathir, 62, thereupon formed UMNO Baru, or New UMNO, and excluded his rivals. That seemed to ensure a permanently divided party and one unable to continue protecting Malay political dominance, considered a bedrock for stability in multiracial Malaysia. Mahathir's oppo-

nents were also disturbed by his heavy-handed attempts to tame an independent judiciary and suppress dissent in general. More than anything else, however, Mahathir's apparent break with the Malay tradition of building consensus was costing him grass-roots support.

By offering Razaleigh and Musa positions as Ministers Without Portfolio, Mahathir turned the tables. Announcing the offer, which elicited loud applause, at the recent inaugural assembly of UMNO Baru, Mahathir said he was extending an olive branch “in the interest of unity.” His rivals “will be damned if they accept and damned if they don't,” reflected a diplomat. Observed an ally of the Prime Minister's: “The pressure from the grass roots has been to settle. So Mahathir listened. And he seems to have won.”

Musa wants more concessions. “The objective is to be back together,” he said last week. “I'm not interested in fighting as an independent in the next election, but as a member of a party with a more compromising spirit.” But Mahathir, riding high, was unlikely to bend further. Some oddsmakers are betting that the Prime Minister, who is not required to hold elections until 1991, may call them as early as next year. ■