

Mahathir Suffers Setback in Midterm Poll

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KUALA LUMPUR Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad was dealt a stunning electoral setback Thursday.

In a midterm election in Johore Bahru, capital of Johore state, independent Shahrir Abdul Samad captured 23,581 of the 37,094 votes cast. (There were 285 spoiled ballots). Datuk Shahrir triggered the election by resigning from Parliament on July 1.

The candidate backed by Dr. Mahathir's political faction, Mas'ud Abdul Rahman, garnered only 10,968 votes, while Abdul Razak Ahmad, a leader of the People's Socialist Party of Malaysia, won 2,260.

Spate of By-Elections

Datuk Shahrir's victory will likely trigger a spate of additional by-elections, as Dr. Mahathir's political opponents attempt to discredit the prime minister's seven-year-old administration. Several of his parliamentary rivals have already indicated that they intend to resign from the legislative body. Under Malaysian law, a by-election is required within 60 days of a vacancy.

Dr. Mahathir and several of his supporters, however, suggested during the campaign that they are considering a constitutional amendment to thwart further midterm elections.

The prime minister said that his opponents are misusing the electoral process requiring by-elections, which should be reserved to fill vacancies left through illness or death.

Nearly 62% of the constituency's 60,292 voters turned out for the election, according to Malaysia's national news agency, Bernama.

The primary issue of the election was Dr. Mahathir himself and his alleged autocratic style of rule. Datuk Shahrir and his supporters had urged voters to signal their dislike of the prime minister through an election setback for his candidate.

The defeat for Dr. Mahathir comes as a blow to his efforts to reconstitute the outlawed United Malays National Organization under his own party, New UMNO. Old UMNO had been declared illegal last February by Malaysia's High Court for harboring illegal branches. The decision was up-

held earlier this month by the Supreme Court, the country's legal tribunal.

The court decision effectively killed any chances for Dr. Mahathir's rivals to revive old UMNO through the legal process. Instead, they are resorting to a staggered election campaign to thwart Dr. Mahathir's increasing political power.

Breakdown by Race

The racial breakdown of the contested constituency generally mirrors Malaysia's ethnic composition. The district has 29,004 Malays, 24,511 ethnic Chinese, 4,832 ethnic Indians and 1,905 people of other categories.

Given the constituency's racial mix, leaders of the ruling National Front coalition had argued that the outcome of the election wouldn't provide a fair reflection of Dr. Mahathir's national support among the politically dominant Malays. Malay allegiance is the crux of the battle between Dr. Mahathir's New UMNO faction and his opponents.

"There is no issue in the by-election," the prime minister said earlier this week. "The only issue is their hate for me