

# Mahathir takes centre- stage

By Nizam Mohamed

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It was a decade of unprecedented events. Politicians made the headlines as usual, but judges and bankers were also drawn into the controversies of the 80s.

However you rate the performance of the leading actor, his influence over the life of the nation is indisputable. So much so these last 10 years may be said to be the Decade of Mahathir.

When Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad took over from Datuk Hussein Onn as Umno president and Prime Minister in 1981, the mood was for change. Whether this meant that the people were ready for what the new chief executive had in mind was another question.

Dr Mahathir gave early notice that he intended to chart a new course for the nation. He hacked to a brave, new Malaysia. He had a vision of an industrialised and prosperous country, with dedicated and disciplined workers following the examples of clean, efficient and trustworthy leaders.

"I dream of a nation that will be respected, that will be looked up to as a model by the rest of the world," Dr Mahathir said.

He had the goodwill of the people, and was assured of his own party's support. In his team were tested Umno veterans, beginning with his deputy, Datuk Musa Hitam, who had beaten Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah for the number two post in the party.

"We have been in touch in and out of the Government," Datuk Musa Hitam told reporters who gathered at the rapport between the two politicians.

Although Tengku Razaleigh remained as Finance Minister, he was not in Dr Mahathir's team. Datuk Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and Datuk Rais Yatim were.

Just before the polls, Dr Mahathir brought in Encik Anwar Ibrahim, the leader of Abim, the Malaysian Muslim Youth Movement. If there was resentment against recruiting an implacable critic of previous administrations, it did not surface then.

Certainly, the landslide win by the Barisan Nasional in the 1982 general election showed no lapse in the people's confidence in the leadership.

The constitutional crisis of 1983-84 served only to enhance Dr Mahathir's standing. Huge crowds received him on his nationwide tour to explain why bills passed by Parliament should become law automatically after a certain period, with or without royal assent. He got the amendments to the Constitution he sought.

In 1984, Datuk Musa again defeated Tengku Razaleigh for the deputy presidency of Umno. As the second half of the 2M administration, Datuk Musa is remembered for his handling of the Sabah crisis in 1985 and the Memali incident later the same year.

## CRISIS IN SABAH

The Sabah crisis revolved around an attempted power grab, after Datuk Joseph Pairin Kitingan and his PBS won the state elections. Datuk Datuk Musa, as acting Prime Minister and Home Minister, rejected what he saw as illegal seizure of power, influencing Yang di-Pertua Negri Tun Adnan Robert to revoke the appointment of Tun Datu Mustapha Harun as Chief Minister the same day that he was sworn in.

Datuk Musa was again acting Prime Minister and Home Minister at the time of the the Memali clash in Kedah's Baling district where 18 people, including four policemen, died after an extremist group led by Ibrahim Libya spurned appeals to surrender.

After tabling a white paper on the Memali episode in the Dewan Rakyat, he gave the go-ahead

for a videotape of the incident to be played over television.

By 1984, Malaysia was in the depths of recession, and Dr Mahathir's honeymoon with the public was coming to an end. Cracks had begun to appear in his relationship with his deputy, and rumblings were heard from all sides, including his own party.

In retrospect, Dr Mahathir's problems could be partly due to failure to temper the zeal of the reformer with the prudence of the politician. Impatient for change, he had not been cautious about retaining the support of people around him.

His critics accused him of ignoring the Umno tradition of respecting the party hierarchy elected by the members. According to them, he wanted only those traditions which helped his position, especially the long-standing practice of ultimate loyalty to the leadership.

The meteoric rise of Encik Anwar, from deputy minister to full minister and as Umno Youth chief, did not help Dr Mahathir's cause. Neither did the high profile that Encik Anwar kept.

Then there was the disaffection among the 800,000 government employees, disappointed at being refused the salary review that they had come to expect every five years, and stung by harsh words from the top.

## DECLINING POPULARITY

Dr Mahathir was not unaware of his declining popularity, and strived to be philosophical about it. "When I was an underdog ... I could do no

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wrong . . . so long as I achieve something, being unpopular doesn't really matter," he told an interviewer.

But even his sympathisers wondered about his seeming disdain for public opinion. At a time when angry talk about businessmen exploiting their ties with him, he appointed in 1984 tycoon Daim Zainuddin as Finance Minister.

The Bumiputra Malaysia Finance Ltd scandal involving \$2.5 billion, which came to light in 1984, showed how difficult it was to speak to an alienated audience.

Moreover, the atmosphere was charged. Bank Bumiputra executive Jalil Ibrahim, who had gone to Hong Kong to investigate BMF's dealings, had been killed.

The people wanted the Government to deal speedily with the culprits, and saw no sense in the Prime Minister's caution against setting up a kangaroo court.

Expressing reservations over the report of the Committee of Inquiry, Dr Mahathir told the Dewan Rakyat that it had accepted as evidence a letter purportedly from a lawyer bearing a signature later found to be forged.

The committee had also accepted letters from criminals, and entries in diaries and letters as valid documents, he said. "If this is the basis of justice, then all someone has to do is to write the name of a person he dislikes in relation to a crime and he could be found guilty." The public was not impressed.

As the debate raged, the issuing of the report to the public appeared almost an end in itself. By the time this happened in 1986, speculation about close friends of BMF chairman Lorrain Osman and company had ceased. And the chorus of dissent against Dr Mahathir grew louder, along with talk of differences between him and his deputy.

## MUSA'S RESIGNATION

In early 1986, Datuk Musa resigned as Deputy Prime Minister. He had wanted to quit as Umno deputy president as well, but was persuaded to stay on. Party vice-president Abdul Ghafar Baba took his place in the Government.

Datuk Musa, in his letter of resignation, said he was quitting because he no longer enjoyed the confidence of Dr Mahathir. The opposition looked at it another way. "The resignation amounted to a vote of no confidence in the Prime Minister," the DAP's Karpal Singh declared.

Despite the troubles in Umno, Dr Mahathir again led the Barisan to a resounding victory, winning more than two-thirds majority in the 1986 general election.

Umno fared very well. It contested 84 parliamentary seats and won 83. In the state seats, only five of its 240 candidates lost.

Its senior partner, the MCA, was not so triumphant. The party could deliver only 17 of the 32 parliamentary constituencies allotted to it. It performed better in the states, winning 43 seats and losing 26.

Considering the crisis it was going through, the MCA could have done worse. It had been embroiled in a bitter and very public tussle for power after Tan Sri Lee San Choon resigned as president in 1983, leaving Dr Neo Yee Pan in charge. When Tan Koon Swan finally won the presidency in 1984, the party was already gasping from battle fatigue.

Mr Tan's arrest in Singapore in 1985 lowered further the party's standing. He was convicted for criminal breach of trust in the Pan-El affair in 1986. The only thing the party could be grateful for was that the trial took place after the polls.

In contrast, the MIC, united after protracted internal bickering, won all six Parliamentary

seats it vied for, and lost only one of the 13 state constituencies assigned to the party.

However, the truce that MIC president Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu had with his deputy, Datuk S. Subramaniam, later crumbled. Their rivalry culminated in this year's presidential election, which Datuk Seri Samy Vellu won.

On the opposition side, the DAP put up a respectable showing. Its tally was 24 of 64 Parliamentary seats, and 37 of 119 state constituencies.

The party was especially successful in Penang, where it won all 10 targeted seats, and failed to gain only one of the seven seats it had eyed.

The results so boosted the DAP's confidence that it gave notice of its intention to capture the state government in the next general election under a plan codenamed *Tanjung II*.

PAS, the other opposition party of consequence, was thrashed. It entered the race for 98 parliamentary constituencies and ended with one. The party set an ambitious goal of 265 state seats and came away with 15.

A closer look, however, showed that PAS had not lost as much support as the results at a glance indicated. In many constituencies, the party was beaten by narrow — in some cases, wafer-thin — margins.

For example, in the parliamentary constituency of Bachok, where 33,627 people voted, PAS lost by only 270. And in the fight for the Peringat state seat, the party was beaten by 136 votes, with the turnout totalling 9,330.

It was not only in Kelantan that PAS lost narrowly to Umno. It had several near misses in Terengganu as well. The state seat of Manir, for example, was lost by just 108 votes, with the turnout totalling 5,934.

## CONFRONTATION IN UMNO

After the national polls, Encik Anwar, who was Agriculture Minister, was given the Education portfolio, which every Prime Minister since Tun Abdul Razak had held before ascending to the helm. Datuk Abdullah Ahmad Badawi went reluctantly to Defence.

And Umno came closer to open confrontation. Datuk Musa joined forces with Tengku Razaleigh, and others like Datuk Abdullah and Datuk Rais fell in line.

The campaign for the 1987 Umno elections was probably the most bitter in the party's history. Tengku Razaleigh, whose supporters blamed Dr Mahathir for his defeat in both contests for the Umno deputy presidency, went for the top post. Datuk Musa locked horns with Encik Ghafar for the second slot.

The attacks and counter-attacks were personal and bordered on the slanderous. At one point, Encik (now Datuk Seri Paduka) Daim threatened to sue B Team leaders for allegations against him, including claims that he used his position to gain from the buying and selling of UMBC shares. No suits were filed.

The narrow win by Dr Mahathir and Encik Ghafar did nothing to bridge the gulf between the leadership and the detractors. Too much had been said and done by both sides against each other.

Even as Tengku Razaleigh pledged support for the leadership, he referred often to the 43 votes which separated him and the party presidency, terming the slim barrier "very significant." Datuk Musa Hitam, whom observers have styled as the "most effective passive campaigner around," appeared more resigned to his fate.

Dr Mahathir himself was in no mood to forgive. Candidates in the party elections were aware of the risks of contesting, he said. "When they win they are expected to get something, and when they lose they cannot be expected to get

what they want. I was aware of the risks . . . .”

Soon after that Tengku Razaleigh and Datuk Rais resigned as Trade and Industry and Foreign Ministers respectively. A series of court battles followed.

Eleven members brought a suit against Dr Mahathir and other Umno officials seeking to nullify the 1987 elections because the party had at the time 30 unapproved branches.

A unity committee set up by the Umno supreme council failed to convince the 11 to drop the suit. They demanded Dr Mahathir's resignation from the top post as a condition for stopping their court action.

## HEIGHTENED RACIAL TENSION

While grappling with the party problems, Dr Mahathir was plagued by racial tension, heightened by a deranged soldier shooting dead a Malay and a Chinese. The Prime Minister said later that it had nothing to do with any communal issue, but caused panic nonetheless, and emptied the streets of Kuala Lumpur.

Politicians seemed not to have noticed, and continued their quarrel over sensitive issues. And party alliances were set aside as they responded to ethnic stirrings.

From October to December of 1987, police arrested 107 people under the Internal Security Act in *Operasi Lalang*.

Among them were Opposition Leader Lim Kit Siang and Karpal Singh of the DAP, Mohamed Fahmi Ibrahim and Ibrahim Ali then of Umno Youth, the MCA's Datuk Yap Pian Hon, and sev-

eral leaders of PAS and the PSRM.

Several papers, including *The Star*, were suspended because of publishing articles seen as prejudicial to harmony and security.

The court scene itself was little altered. The suit of the Umno 11, as it came to be called, was heard and the party was declared an unlawful society by the High Court in February 1988. The plaintiffs filed an appeal in the Supreme Court. A new Umno was formed the same month with Dr Mahathir as pro tem president.

Events in the months that followed — climaxing in the dismissal in August of Lord President Tun Mohamed Salleh Abbas after a tribunal hearing which he did not attend — opened anew the floodgates of criticisms against Dr Mahathir.

Five Supreme Court judges, who heard and granted Tun Salleh's application to stop the tribunal from submitting its report to the Yang di-Pertuan Agong, were suspended in July. After a tribunal hearing, three were re-instated and two sacked in October.

As for the appeal of the Umno 11, it was rejected by in August by the Supreme Court, with Acting Lord president Tan Sri Abdul Hamid Omar, Chief Justice of Borneo Tan Sri Lee Hun Hoe and three other judges on the bench. And, as their counsel told reporters later, “the court battle to legalise the original Umno is over.”

But the fight became more intense outside the courtrooms, with Tengku Razaleigh vowing to “go to the people.” Johor Baru MP Datuk Shahrir Abdul Samad resigned his seat and sought reelection in the same constituency in August 1988

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to give the people a chance "to send a message" to Dr Mahathir.

Datuk Musa declared his support for Datuk Shahrir and joined Tengku Razaleigh in Semangat 46, an as yet unregistered group which took its name from the birthdate of the original Umno.

Datuk Shahrir won with a huge majority, and Tengku Razaleigh was quick to claim it as a show of support for Semangat 46. Others saw the victory as less an endorsement of Tengku Razaleigh's leadership as rejection of Dr Mahathir's stewardship.

Indeed, it was the lowest ebb of Dr Mahathir's tenure. The unprecedented developments affecting the judiciary and his unbending attitude towards his foes had pushed many to the side of his archrival, enjoying the vociferous backing of elder statesman Tunku Abdul Rahman.

The first Prime Minister, in his 80s, almost blind and moving around in a wheelchair, was tireless in his assault against Dr Mahathir. The Tunku accused him of being a dictator, an oppressor of civil rights, and a host of other things.

Under the relentless pressure of people and events, Dr Mahathir did the unexpected. He softened his stand, and in the same instance seemed to have rediscovered himself as a politician, as a practitioner of the art of compromise — and of the impossible.

In the final lap of the campaign for the Parit Raja state seat in October last year, Dr Mahathir opened the doors of Umno to all Malays and invited supreme council members of the old party to resume their former positions.

To which Tengku Razaleigh, the Kelantan prince benefiting from the people's perception of Dr Mahathir as arrogant, replied: "Even if I am to die and am reborn, I will not join Umno Baru."

The next fight was Ampang Jaya in January this year. Dr Mahathir received word of the Barisan victory while resting in his hospital bed after a coronary by-pass.

Although Dr Mahathir took several months to fully recover, his reconciliation initiative remained in good shape. If anything, it became robust with more former Umno members joining the new party. The most prominent among them was Datuk Musa.

His relations with Tun Hussein Onn, who had been critical of Dr Mahathir but had always kept his views within the limits of polite behaviour, were also on the mend.

Racial tension had abated, and all ISA detainees rounded up in *Operasi Lalang* had been released. The banned newspapers were back on the streets long before that.

And significantly, the Barisan went on to win five of the six subsequent by-elections in the peninsula.

## TALKS FOR UNITY

The Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Kuala Lumpur last October enhanced Dr Mahathir's stature as a statesman. Outgoing Commonwealth secretary-general Sir Shridath Ramphal, joining others in praise of the Prime Minister, gave the Kuala Lumpur CHOGM a 3M rating: The Marvel of Mahathir and Malaysia.

Tengku Razaleigh seemed undaunted by Dr Mahathir's apparent change of fortune. Semangat, now registered, had agreed to form a grouping with PAS and Berjasa called *Angkatan Perpaduan Ummah*. And he was working out an electoral pact with the DAP.

Then, even as the battle lines were being drawn, Dr Mahathir introduced another episode in the political drama of the 80s. He extended the hand of friendship to the Tunku, whom he said he respected as the first Prime Minister, a former Umno president, *Bapa Malaysia* and an elder.

He agreed to the Tunku's suggestion for unity talks with Tengku Razaleigh, and received the former statesman as his guest at the recent Umno general assembly along with Tun Hussein and veterans like Datuk Senu Abdul Rahman and Datuk Bahaman Samsuddin.

The delegates gave Dr Mahathir the go-ahead for peace efforts, and the meeting with Tengku Razaleigh was held earlier this month. The talks were exploratory, and nothing substantive was achieved.

It may well be that nothing would come of the talks and the differences between the two sides would have to be resolved in the next general election, widely expected to be held early next year.

Tengku Razaleigh himself may want an electoral clash, having come this far where he is ready to finalise details of his grand design. But the situation he faces now is vastly different from what he found three years ago.

While Tengku Razaleigh counts on his allies to help him achieve his goals, Umno's partners in the Barisan seem prepared for the challenge. The MCA notably is no more the tattered party that Datuk Dr Ling Liong Sik inherited. It appears poised to redeem its poor showing in the last national polls.

Dr Mahathir, whose rating among the people has seemed so central to Tengku Razaleigh's strategy, is no longer chief villain even as he remains the main protagonist.

And so the decade ends, as it had begun, with Dr Mahathir on centre-stage and the people awaiting his next act.