

"Surely the time will come, soon, for a new leader to head the party"

By Roger Mitton KUALA LUMPUR

With that statement last week, Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, 69, unequivocally let Malaysians know that he would shortly be handing over power to his deputy Anwar Ibrahim. Said the PM in his speech to UMNO's national assembly: "I have led the party for more than 14 years. My wish is to present to my successor a party which is strong, united and credible." The impending changeover has been openly discussed in party circles for many months. But the talk began to crescendo in September, when a series of senior Mahathir loyalists succumbed to ignominious defeat in party divisional elections.

The culmination was the loss by former cabinet minister Sanusi Jundi, a bedrock Mahathir man, to a relative unknown backed by Anwar in a divisional election in the PM's home state of Kelah on Sept. 29. Said Mahathir at the time: "I am very sad, because I had expressed my stance supporting Sanusi. His defeat will bring many implications. I can't say what they are." Perhaps he couldn't, but the backroom boys in Kuala Lumpur had no qualms about spelling them out. Their implication was: Mahathir's days as premier are numbered. When some of the PM's staunchest backers in the cabinet started talking about making changes to the voting procedure in UMNO elections that would favor Mahathir, it only fueled the sense that Mahathir was trying to fend off a possible challenge from Anwar in next year's party polls.

Such a challenge was never likely — Anwar is far too savvy a politician to take such a step. Yet, a message had gone out from the young Turks around Anwar that their patience had a limit. A climate of uncertainty arose in which nobody knew quite what was going to happen next and whether the working relationship between Mahathir and Anwar had been adversely affected. Party members — and, indeed, all Malaysians — needed reassurance. So, it began to be orchestrated early last month.

Senior sections of the party and its state bodies sent out messages that they were happy with Mahathir and Anwar in their present posts and that they wanted no fight between them next year. Said UMNO Youth head Nazri Aziz: "We will not allow any contest for the top two posts and we will work hard to convince members." The

Domestic media hammered home the message that the nation wanted Mahathir and Anwar to stay where they are.

The party assembly that opened Nov. 23 turned into a gushing four-day glorification of the leadership. UMNO's Sec.-Gen. Mohamed Rahmat said: "We love you both." Anwar pledged his unswerving loyalty to Mahathir: "My allegiance to the president should no longer be questioned. There is no need for anyone to pit us against each other or waste their time in nominating me for the presidency." Mahathir responded by saying how touched he was by Anwar's gesture, and that at a time "which is not too far in the future" he would hand over the leadership to Anwar. The assembly passed an unprecedented motion that there would be no contest for the top two posts until 1999.

Why did Mahathir make an announcement now? Says social activist Syed Husin Ali, who has known Anwar for many years: "I think it was to pacify the Anwar people, who want him to go quickly." Most seemed to think it was a good time to clear the air. Comments Moehamad Izat of the Malay Chamber of Commerce: "Mahathir says he wants to hand over a party fully intact to his successor. It's a responsible statement. Whatever needs to be said has been said and what better time than in the party's general assembly."

Adds Penang-based academic Chandra Muzaffar: "A vast majority of UMNO people will be happy with the decision of the assembly for no contest. If the PM and Anwar were actually contesting against each other, the repercussions would have been devastating for the party." Others felt Mahathir had no choice. Says Syed Husin: "I think the pressure on him was strong. And it also came from Anwar's boys, although they don't like to use that term."

When exactly will Mahathir step down? Says Syed Husin: "Clearly there has been an agreement of some sort between the two men, but exactly what it is only they know. To me, it looks like a compromise between the two sides." All that has been indicated is that Mahathir will most likely step down voluntarily in favor of Anwar between now and 1999.

Some suggest 1997, giving time for the PM to enjoy UMNO's 50th anniversary next year; others say 1998, so Mahathir can officiate at the Commonwealth Games, an APEC summit and the opening of the new K.L. airport; yet others feel he may stay on until 1999. This is improbable. It is more likely to be next year. The November 1996 anniversary assembly will be a gala affair, with Mahathir the focus of adulation. What better time to pass on the baton to a dynamic young leader like Anwar, whom he personally brought into the party and groomed for the post. ■