

Rounding up the right support

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has reiterated that government efforts to handle the economic uncertainties can only be effective with the full support of the people. However, the lead must come from the country's leaders, especially those in Umno, writes SHAMSUL AKMAR.

THE success of the rat extermination team to eliminate nearly 300 rodents at the Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA) in Sepang within five days is commendable.

While the problem is not something major, or one which can affect the smooth running of KLIA, the presence of the rats can be irritating.

But looking at how focussed the KLIA authorities are in dealing with the rodents, the public can set their minds at rest that the remaining rats still at large will soon be dealt with.

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This is how irritants should be handled - no matter how minor or trivial they seem to be.

"Dr Mahathir should do just that," said an Umno supreme council member.

"Either he ignores them or deals with them swiftly, and then concentrate on our nation's priorities which, at this stage, is coping with economic problems."

Johor Umno information chief Khaled Nordin believes that this is what Dr Mahathir has been doing of late.

"He has strengthened his posi-

tion and now he can concentrate on (tackling) the economic problems," he added.

Talk of this nature surfaced following Tun Daim Zainuddin's return to the Cabinet and the resignation of Johan Jaafar as editor-in-chief of the Utusan Melayu Group.

Adding spice to the rumour mill is speculation of a few more resignations involving some senior editors.

Whether these developments should be read as the strengthening of Dr Mahathir's position, or whether the impact is positive or otherwise, is difficult to ascertain.

One thing is for sure. The resignation of Johan has been read as a political manoeuvre with two views to it.

On one side, it is seen as an attempt to curtail free press. On the other, it is viewed as a removal of a person who joined top-level journalism to serve a certain political agenda.

If the latter is the case, it should not be a major setback because there is nothing wrong in removing a political appointee.

But Dr Mahathir has denied any political pressure leading to Johan's resignation.

Raising a pertinent point, the Prime Minister said that when Johan assumed the position, there was talk of it being political in nature, and when he resigned, people speculated that it was because of political pressure.

Dr Mahathir's remarks clearly show the tendency of the public to read all developments linked to Umno as being political in nature.

As much as Dr Mahathir has denied any political hand behind Johan's resignation, a number of Umno members may still be unconvinced.

But that is the way things are in Umno, especially when the party elections are not far off.

"Dr Mahathir has repeatedly asked the people to give their full support to ensure the effectiveness of the Government's efforts to overcome the economic problems," said a Kelantan Umno leader.

"I believe the majority of the people are behind the Government.

"But there are several political ambiguities due to excessive interpretations. These can lead to an unhealthy political situation," he said.

Merbok Umno division chief Arzmi Hamid feels that party members should reduce politicking at this stage and give their full support to Dr Mahathir and the Government in dealing with the eco-

nomie problems.

This is easier said than done.

When former Deputy Prime Minister Tun Ghafar Baba decided to offer himself to help the Government explain the economic problems to the grassroots and measures they need to take, it was read as a political move.

Similarly, when former Finance Minister Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah came out to help by expressing his support for Dr Mahathir's efforts in handling the economic situation, it was read as an attempt by him to return to mainstream politics.

Such interpretations are expected, especially when individuals making such moves are of some political standing.

The priority now is for leaders to stop excessive politicking and proceed with what needs to be done for the country.

A political-and-corporate figure said that while speculation could never be suppressed, it was important for Dr Mahathir to be aware that the people were not against changes.

"Surely they will be supportive if changes are made in the Cabinet and the executive wing in the states.

"Under the present circumstances, passengers in the Cabinet and other executive positions cannot be allowed to stay on as they will impede Dr Mahathir's efforts to revitalise the economy," he said.

He explained that if Dr Mahathir were to make these changes at this stage - replacing the "passengers" with capable individuals who have the energy to complement his efforts - the people would rally behind him.

Khaled says the situation now warrants a strong political entity which is single-minded in dealing with the nation's woes.

What the people need is a focussed political force, one with considerable conviction - not one which is repeatedly distracted by political power play.

Some government leaders, including those at state level, are too engrossed and set in their ways to play an effective role. Others overindulge in political play and have, from time to time, become irritants to the system.

To remove these irritants will not be as easy as eliminating the rats at KLIA.

But both rodents and irritants have to be dealt with because one involves the nation's pride and the other, the country's economic survival.