

Mahathir Set to take on PAS

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PM goes on the offensive as opposition party makes inroads into traditional Umno strongholds

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KUALA LUMPUR: The failure of several Umno committees and their strategies to stop PAS from making inroads into traditional Umno strongholds has forced Prime Minister and Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to take on PAS directly.

He has freed himself from some government duties, turning these over to his deputy Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, to concentrate on party matters and in the main to counter PAS.

At the Umno assembly in May, he had said he would concentrate more on party matters.

"Mahathir feels it is time to go on the offensive as PAS has done much damage," said an Umno insider.

The 1999 general election results proved PAS's effectiveness in creating anti-Umno and particularly anti-Mahathir "hatred" specifically and against the government in general.

PAS's non-stop campaign in the form of religious ceramahs have moulded the minds of a whole generation of young Malays to oppose Umno, if not at the very least, to doubt the party's and the government's views on Islam.

Mahathir knows PAS has been targeting young Malays from the age of eight and up and are very active at colleges and universities both in

and outside the country

Already several closed-door meetings have been held between Mahathir and several hundred Umno speakers on issues, methodologies and strategies to counter PAS's influence.

In fact, several PAS speakers who have defected to Umno were roped in to brief the participants on how PAS operates, what issues are being highlighted, how they are presented and the target groups to aim for.

Coming out of the closed-door meetings, participants, comprising selected Umno leaders? expressed confidence in the forthcoming campaign against PAS.

Although former deputy prime minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim is considered one of the major factors in Umno's failure to attract young professional Malays, the main factor still remains the PAS "psy-war" on young voters, aided by infighting within Umno.

"The Anwar factor is just a passing fad. Malays will forget the incident in a few years," said a veteran Umno member.

After years of working for Malaysia both at home and abroad, Mahathir was disappointed at the performance of his own party in the competition with PAS.

After leading Umno for over 20 years, Mahathir has finally come to terms with the party's need for an overhaul.

Infighting and scrambling for positions have been cited as factors contributing to the

decline in support from the Malays.

Veteran party members said scrambling for positions has become paramount and more important than warding off the PAS threat.

A federal Umno leader said he does have to contend with PAS but could not fully concentrate because he has to look behind him to make

sure that his position in the division was secure.

"After all, Umno members are good at undermining one's position to the extent that only at the division's election does one learn that one's support has suddenly eroded," he added.

Incumbent office-bearers are already busily campaigning for the next biennial

party, branch and divisional elections due next year.

Losing positions in the party means losing the opportunity to further one's personal interests in business and politics. When this happens, one has to go back in the street looking for jobs.

"At this time now, this situation seems bad," says a party leader.

"Therefore, in the absence of party leaders who can fully concentrate on the offensive against PAS, Mahathir feels he has to lead the war himself.

Already, at party headquarters, information chief Datuk Mustapa Mohamed has formed a 25-member team comprising ulamas to teach and train speakers on how to counter PAS.

A Selangor Umno leader said this is a good move but the effect may not be there at all because "division's information chief are mostly those who have no time to meet the grassroots".

"Divisions' information chiefs are appointed by the division leaders themselves and as such, they too will be busy campaigning for the divisions' leaders for the coming divisional election.

"So when can they have the time to meet and talk to the grassroots about PAS?" asks a state Umno leader.

He says PAS campaigners and leaders are working full-time against Umno since "they have no fear from within because there is no scrambling for positions among themselves."

Against such a backdrop, Mahathir is determined to take on the PAS bull by the horns.

He fired the first salvo when he highlighted PAS's claims that Prophet Muhammad was a leader of the first Islamic party as stated in a book.

PAS might realise too late that it has awakened a sleeping tiger.