

Crying Crocodile Tears?

Mahathir offers a surprise resignation and then recants. What is Malaysia's prime minister up to this time?

BY LORIEN HOLLAND

MAHATHIR MOHAMAD IS nothing if not complex. Detractors say Malaysia's prime minister is a strongman who has ridden roughshod over the press, the judiciary and anyone else who has stood in his way. His supporters revere him as the man who made their economy a Southeast Asian success story, kept a lid on ethnic tensions and brought their nation unprecedented international political clout. Although he has described himself as a shy fellow, on the world stage he is loud, controversial and, most of all, unpredictable.

Last week, in a televised closing speech at his party's annual conference, Asia's longest-serving leader did not disappoint. In a bizarre scene, a clearly emotional Mahathir announced his resignation. Both his tears and impassioned pleas from cabinet ministers for him to stay on prevented him finishing what he had to say, and the 76-year-old could only stammer: "No, no, I have decided, I have decided." An hour after being led away from the podium by shocked party officials, Mahathir's deputy, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, told the Malaysian people that the prime minister

had been persuaded to remain in power. Three days later, while Mahathir vacationed on the Italian coast, his party announced that he would continue to serve in office until October 2003, when power should pass to Abdullah, a moderate voice and longtime fixture in Malaysian politics.

This most recent episode in the political life of Mahathir seems to have caught everyone by surprise. "All of us were shocked; we really hadn't expected it. We had never seen such a scene; it was truly emotional and truly overwhelming," says cabinet minister Abdul Kadir Sheikh Fadzir. In recent years Mahathir has made headlines for blaming the International Monetary Fund and financier George Soros for regional economic troubles, and for promoting Asian values over Western mores and for the jailing of Anwar Ibrahim, his former deputy. Such moves suited his public image as Asia's unapologetic defender with a firm hand on domestic politics. "Whatever people say about him, Mahathir is an extraordinary person. Not just because he is smart and has cunning ways, but because he has survived so long," says Syed Husin Ali, leader of an opposition party that has sparred with him for more

than 30 years. So what might Mahathir be up to this time?

Nothing, according to his family and political supporters. "I don't think there was any hidden agenda; in the last few months he's won back high levels of support for the party and the government, and I think he decided it was time to go," says a close supporter.

To some, this explanation has a hollow ring. The Islamic opposition, already on the defensive from Mahathir's surging popularity, claims that his tears were pure theater—and the opening move in an effort to marginalize their support before the transfer of power. "I maintain my stand that the entire thing was staged to gain support and sympathy," said Nasharuddin Mat Isa, secretary-general of the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party. Some of Mahathir's own advisers believe his surprise resignation may fuel support for the most contested aspects of his agenda. These include reintroducing English-language teaching into schools and curtailing Malay affirmative-action programs.

Mahathir has built his political career championing the rights of Malays, who make up two thirds of the population. But he has become increasingly frustrated with the group's continued dependence on state resources, especially compared with Malaysia's ethnic Chinese community. At last week's party conference, Mahathir won official support to marginally reduce Malay education quotas, but according to senior officials, he still faces significant grass-roots resistance from Malays who are not ready to level the playing field.

Whether his emotion was genuine or calculated, it is a safe bet that the next 16 months of Mahathir's rule will be conducted with his legacy in mind. The outpouring of public support during his most recent political drama is also the best evidence of his largest failing as the country's leader. Malaysia remains a society where political life and democratic institutions have long been under the shadow of one man. For 21 years, Mahathir has encouraged his countrymen to remain dependent on his singular presence. It is ironic that one of his final goals may be to encourage Malays to become more independent. If he fails, it may be the Malaysian people who have something to cry about. ■