
Malaysia

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FROM OUR MALAYSIA CORRESPONDENT

HOW does he do it? In 12 years as Malaysia's prime minister, Dr Mahathir Mohamad has often been a puzzle. Ordinary Malaysians are pleased with his economic success story, with growth rates of more than 8% in each of the past five years. But, more worryingly for Dr Mahathir, it is in the ruling party, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), that his authority is being questioned.

It was Dr Mahathir's recent clash with Malaysia's nine sultans over their privileges that triggered the current criticism within UMNO about their chief. The sultans themselves may not be a big issue: many, if not most, Malaysians agree with the prime minister that some privileges should be taken from them, such as their immunity from prosecution.

Nonetheless, Dr Mahathir's manner of dealing with the sultans has upset many of the people in his party. He has made increasingly bitter and public attacks on them. He has even stopped his traditional weekly briefing of the king, who is elected by the sultans for a five-year term. According to one UMNO stalwart, the prime minister is letting vindictiveness get in the way of his judgment: "Such public attacks are not the Malay way of doing things."

Dr Mahathir has never cared too much for the "Malay way". A doctor before he entered politics, he brought a new urgency to the job of prime minister, taking over from the relaxed aristocrats who had run the country since independence in 1957. He has seen his job as trying to persuade Malays—only half Malaysia's population of 18m—to work as hard as the Chinese, who make up about a third of the country's people and run much of its business. Otherwise, the Malays' ascendancy could be threatened.

The issue of the sultans has reminded

UMNO that, where persuasion has failed, Dr Mahathir has not hesitated to use the firm stamp of authority, whatever enemies he may make. Taking on the sultans, however, could rebound on him. Having lifted the lid on the alleged misdemeanours of some sultans—ranging from corruption to murder—Dr Mahathir may not be able to stop public prying in other areas, particularly the affairs of senior UMNO officials and ministers.

The ruling party controls some of Malaysia's biggest business operations and has grown rich as the economy has prospered. Companies connected with UMNO are in charge of some of the biggest development projects. UMNO-connected enterprises control the country's main newspapers and the only privately held television channel. The line between UMNO politics and big business is often blurred. The royals are not the only ones who stand accused of privilege and patronage.

Interesting manoeuvrings are now going on in the UMNO hierarchy. Some ministers are rushing to the prime minister's cause: Anwar Ibrahim, the finance minister, and viewed by many as most likely to succeed Dr Mahathir as prime minister, is prominent among his lieutenants. But Mr Anwar's rivals, among them the foreign minister, Abdullah Badawi, and the agriculture minister, Sanusi Junid, are playing things more cautiously.

In the past, by fair means and foul, Dr Mahathir has tamed his opponents. The UMNO elections due later this year are likely to decide Dr Mahathir's successor. But, apparently revitalised after a heart operation a few years ago, Dr Mahathir, who is 66, shows no sign of wanting to relinquish power. No one is suggesting a party putsch against the great man, but there is no doubting the nervousness in the UMNO ranks.

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