

'We want you back, Dr M'
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Chants of 'long live Mahathir' and 'we want you back' echoed through a family club in Kulai, Johor, where the former premier addressed an audience of about 500 people yesterday.

Earlier, a dozen school children beat on their kompangs as Dr Mahathir Mohamad made his way through the crowd, some of whom were non-Malays. This was followed by a lion dance and silat presentation.

Ignoring the master of ceremony's plea for the crowd to be seated in the badminton hall, many had waited at the entrance for nearly an hour.

And when the 82-year-old former premier finally appeared, they mobbed him to catch a closer glimpse and shake the hand of the man who had led the nation for 22 years.

When Mahathir, who was dressed in a grey suit, stepped into the hall, he was greeted with a standing ovation and rapturous cheer.

If yesterday's function is to serve as a benchmark, it was evident that Umno's ostracisation of the former premier had failed to curb the adulation he enjoys among his hardcore supporters.

However, the number of Umno members gracing his functions had noticeably declined and even Mahathir was aware of this.

"Before (when I was prime minister), thousands flocked to my gatherings to kiss my hand. But now, things are different," he told the multi-racial audience.

The function, organised by the Kulai Besar Umno division, saw only some 300 party members present.

Stinging comeback

Mahathir, who has been rather low key since suffering a mild heart attack five months ago, returned with a sting.

As usual, bearing the brunt of his venomous attack was none other than his handpicked successor Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

He criticised the prime minister for his alleged poor management of the nation's economy and failure to tackle the rising crime rate. He also reiterated his long standing complaints about the crooked bridge, cronyism, corruption and being sidelined by Umno.

"If the economy is not good, who knows what might happen. The non-Malays might leave the country. Are the Malays prepared to take over?" he asked.

"We are a multiracial country. We prosper together - we do not take things away from the Chinese and Indians," he said.

Mahathir also pointed out that there is a lack of local projects trickling down.

"They speak of RMK9 (Ninth Malaysia Plan). Saya tak nampak pun. (I don't see it)," he stressed sarcastically.

"In fact I think the audience here have not had a single project come their way. Has anyone in this hall received a project so far? Anyone?" he quipped.

After a brief silence, the crowd cried 'no' in unison and Mahathir smiled.

Mahathir era was better

During the question-and-answer session later, an Indian businessman lamented that business opportunities are on the decline.

"Things were better during your time," he told the former premier, who smiled at the remark.

Following this, a Chinese businessman, who also concurred with the view that the Mahathir era was more prosperous, complained about the present government's policies.

Citing the cut in government expenditure, he said this was not favourable to the local economy.

However, he disagreed with Mahathir's earlier remark that the Chinese would leave the country if the economic opportunities for non-Malays dwindle.

"As far as I know, most Chinese here think of Malaysia as their home ... they want to build their future here," said the businessman.

Some in the audience even went to the extent of asking Mahathir how to 'get rid of Pak Lah (Abdullah)'. The former premier opted to remain silent on this.

"We are tired of the indecisiveness of the government ... It was clearly shown in the bridge project which was scrapped," voiced out a local Umno member.

Whereas another Umno member described the censuring of Mahathir as an act of treachery.

All in all, the three-hour event was a clear indicator that come bouquets or brickbats, Mahathir is determined to speak his mind and be a thorn in Abdullah's side.

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