

Dr M warns Najib of potential leadership putsch

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By M Jegathesan, AFP

Four years after leading a charge to oust Malaysia's previous prime minister, authoritarian ex-leader Mahathir Mohamad is making his sizeable influence felt again as a close election looms.

Mahathir, who towered over Malaysia for 22 years with his grand development projects and hard-nosed politics, is 87 but has peeled back the years to step from the shadows and whip up support for the long-ruling regime he moulded.

Through his blog and visits to key constituencies, Mahathir has sounded off in typically blunt style, warning that a loss by the 56-year-old government would bring chaos.

In shades of four years ago, he told AFP that Prime Minister Najib Razak could face a ruling-party leadership putsch like his predecessor if he doesn't improve on a 2008 polls setback that shocked the BN ruling coalition.

"Of course, if he does not perform, there will be some necessity to switch horses," Mahathir said in an interview at one of his spacious offices.

"There could be a lot of disappointment and maybe a move to challenge him. That is normal."

Such comments carry weight after Mahathir, who retired in 2003, helped dump his own chosen successor, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, with scathing criticism a year after the polls debacle.

Mahathir, known as "Dr M" for his medical training, is revered by many Malays - the country's majority ethnic group - for bringing economic success, stability, and entrenching Malay dominance under his firm grip.

"Mahathir remains very influential within (the ruling party) Umno and continues to command sizeable support among the grassroots," said Ibrahim Suffian, head of leading polling firm Merdeka Centre.

But with a rising opposition promising to end authoritarianism, Mahathir is seen trying to protect his legacy.

That puts Najib under pressure as he leads Umno, the country's dominant party, into polls due by late June and expected to see a thin government victory.

Mahathir has publicly questioned liberalising gestures by Najib, warning of possible chaos in a multi-racial country where some minority Chinese and Indians resent Malay dominance.

Najib is under probation

Mahathir is considered close to Najib's deputy, Muhyiddin Yassin, who is seen as a Malay nationalist, and could seek to influence Umno leadership contests expected soon after the general election.

"Najib is under probation and the principal who will decide Najib's future is Mahathir," said opposition figure Lim Kit Siang, who was jailed under Mahathir.

Mahathir, who moves slowly these days but remains quick-witted, has been relatively quiet in recent years but said his fear of an opposition win had changed that.

"I worry the people (will) change the government. There will be religious strife. If the opposition wins, this country will face a lot of difficulties," he said.

Critics accuse him of being out of step with the national mood and sowing fear.

They point in particular to his patronage of right-wing Muslim group Perkasa, formed after the 2008 elections, which staunchly defends Malay dominance and is accused of stirring racial and religious tension.

Opposition Leader Anwar Ibrahim, however, sees Mahathir's re-emergence as a blessing.

Anwar was Mahathir's heir apparent until a spat between them resulted in Anwar's dismissal as deputy prime minister in 1998 and six-year jailing on corruption and sodomy charges widely seen as politically motivated.

Anwar said his old boss was inadvertently helping galvanise support for the opposition's pledge to chart a course away from hardline Mahathirism.

"I think it probably helps us," Anwar said with a laugh.

- AFP

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