

With friends like Mahathir, you don't need enemies

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COMMENT Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak must be mulling the thought that with allies like Dr Mahathir Mohamad he does not need adversaries.

Almost daily, the retired former prime minister has something to say about current affairs, not all of it benign to the interests of the incumbent PM.

Few believed that when he retired in October 2003, after 22 years as PM, Mahathir would go gently into the good night of political retirement and memoir writing.

Still fewer expected that he would continue to stalk the political arena, spewing darts from his blowgun.

After all, he was an advanced septuagenarian when he retired, an age that's not exactly hospitable to a post-race lap. Further, he disclaimed any interest in a Lee Kuan Yew-like minister mentor role.

But just like General Carl Clausewitz's observation that war is the continuation of politics by other means, so too Mahathir's retirement from prime ministerial office is the resumption of political leadership from vantages other than the bully pulpit.

From the sidelines, Mahathir exerted his influence, especially when matters on successor Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's watch were not going according to his taste.

When and if they did, he was loud in remonstrance, even to the extent of threatening to quit Umno.

One is reminded of Kelantan Menteri Besar Nik Aziz Nik Mat's sally that Mahathir was more useful to the opposition if he was still a member of Umno than if he were out, which was what the ex-PM threatened to do at one stage of his harassment of the hapless Abdullah.

In high dudgeon over Abdullah's leadership, Mahathir at one stage threw in his resignation from Umno but was mollified by Najib enough to have it rescinded.

Noose tightening

Just now, Najib must be feeling rueful about that exercise in pacification of Mahathir because it has brought him no dividends.

From the start of his premiership four years ago, Najib has bent over backwards not to offend the supposed retiree, all in the euphoric hope that he won't court the fate of his predecessor Abdullah who had to run the gauntlet of Mahathir's carping criticisms until he

caved in to the pressure.

With the latest comments by Mahathir that the PM would have to relinquish his position as Umno president if he but wins GE13 narrowly, Najib must have felt the noose tightening around his neck.

True, Mahathir is no respecter of the proprieties governing intramural political conversation - he only abides by the rules when it suits him - still, his reminder to Najib that the latter is dangling by a shriveling thread must be considered unhelpful, what with Najib facing a tight general election.

Talk of confidence-building measures, this is like telling a friend who faces the prospect of being hung in a few weeks' time that you have withdrawn your support for the abolition of capital punishment.

Najib has misjudged Mahathir's character which is the epitome of Charles de Gaulle's dictum that in politics there are no permanent friends or enemies; there are only permanent interests.

For GE13, Mahathir's interest lies in a Najib victory that is narrower than Abdullah's was at GE12.

That way, Najib will be challenged for the Umno presidency - Mahathir would prefer he vacates it as Abdullah did - by current deputy, Muhyiddin Yassin, whose elevation would pave the way for Mahathir's son, Mukhriz, to rise in the party hierarchy.

Mahathir has taken care to deny any interest in the prospects for upward mobility of Muhyiddin, but that is a denial that is more for the sake of form than for actual content.

Seen as weak and ineffectual

When Mahathir retired in October 2003, he exerted pressure from behind the scenes on successor Abdullah to name Najib as the deputy which Abdullah was reluctant to do, preferring to leave the selection to an elective assembly of Umno that he intended to convene only after seeking his own mandate at a general election.

But Mahathir, to forestall a possible Abdullah preference for Muhyiddin over Najib, forced the PM's hand and had Najib named as deputy PM in January 2004.

Two months later, in March 2004, Abdullah won an overwhelming endorsement at GE11, a victory that would have made his preference of a deputy, subtly conveyed of course, irresistible to Umno delegates at the subsequent elective assembly of the party.

Mahathir's leadership preferences chop and change, but his interests - self more than party-centred - remain permanent. That these are now running counter to Najib's best interests is clear.

Mahathir's comment yesterday that, if he were PM, he would have called the election last

year is the sort of smart talk on hindsight that is disdained as cheap by incumbents and retirees alike from high office, especially when they belong in the same side of the political divide.

The comment only serves to emphasise Najib's ineptness in deferring the election to the point that it shows he is scared stiff of the probable results.

His disinclination to offend Mahathir and his dithering over when to call the general election has shown him up as weak and ineffectual.

They have brought him no benefits, underscoring the point that in politics, irresolution is a dead end.

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