

In London, Dr M echoing complaints of ex-opponents
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COMMENT "What are we to do?" asked a concerned student at a public meeting in London on Wednesday night.

"What we have to do is to make sure the opposition is strong - we are trying to recruit new members - we aim for one million members. If people want to help us overthrow the government, please join us."

Wow, this is hot stuff!

This was not said by the usual opposition suspects in Malaysia. It was said by Dr Mahathir Mohamad, the 4th and longest serving Malaysian prime minister. He was speaking at a public event on Sept 21 at The Senate House of London University. The event was organised by the Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs (Ideas).

Throughout his speech, Mahathir (*photo*) used the pronoun 'we' when referring to the opposition. When asked about jailed opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim who was his former deputy prime minister-turned-one-time enemy, he said there was now "common interest between him and me". That common interest is presumably getting rid of the present prime minister.

He told the audience, "Lots of people live in fear... You can be arrested anywhere without a warrant of arrest... If you report to the police, your lawyer could be detained... I have been questioned four times... If you want to question me, charge me."

To some, it's ironic that this former prime minister is now echoing the complaints of his former opponents. But politics being politics, yesterday's enemy can be today's ally. That at least is the view amongst some in the room who had previously campaigned against him when he was in charge. Others have no time for him.

Although Mahathir is now expressing the need for reform in light of today's problems, he has not conceded to making any mistakes in the past. When asked if he had planted the seeds of today's conundrum, Mahathir was quick to respond with a smile: "It's normal for people to accuse me of wrongdoings, but there is no evidence."

When asked if he had resigned too early, he said he chose two prime ministers, but they had let him down. "One was Mr Clean before he became the PM," he said, and the second was the son of a former hardworking prime minister. "How do I know a PM was going to steal?" he asked.

'If you read the Quran you don't go round killing people'

On the problems facing the Islamic world, he said if you read the Quran you don't go around killing people. He criticised Muslims for ignoring the teachings of Islam.

On the lighter side, when asked if he liked Rosmah's diamond, he said, "We are ashamed... No prime minister's wife can afford such things." His wife, modestly dressed, was seated in the front row. I didn't see any Birkin bag.

I managed to ask two questions. One was about Mahathir's views on the role of civil society and whether he envisaged 'a sea of yellow' come Nov 19. That is the date for Bersih's day of action to advocate for clean and fair elections. My second query relates to his vision for Bersatu, and how the new party could reflect the multi-racial and multi-religious character of Malaysia. He answered one of my questions in the best way he could, but missed the other.

At 91, he is still a consummate politician, not showing any signs of fatigue standing on his feet for over an hour.

It is clear from Wednesday night's session that this former prime minister is on a mission to remove the current PM. His main speech was exclusively on 1MDB. He did not use this occasion to announce any comprehensive programme to distinguish Bersatu from Umno.

The task to persuade one million voters to switch allegiance from Umno to Bersatu will certainly be a colossal one for anyone, let alone someone at 91. Love him or loathe him, it's a brave undertaking.

After the talk, my friend asked a Malay student whether Mahathir's talk had changed his views on Malaysian politics. "More confused," came the reply.

That's good, I thought. At least Dr M managed to get one person thinking, there may be more.

(A video recording will soon be released by Monsoons Book Club - details at monsoonsbookclub and on Facebook.)

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