

The bickering old boys
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Manjit Bhatia

There's something quite stunning and wonderfully comical about former prime minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad, taking potshots at the very man he had handpicked as his deputy when he was in power, after earlier having shamelessly unclothed his other erstwhile deputy Anwar Ibrahim. Then, upon his retirement in 2003, Mahathir installed Abdullah Ahmad Badawi as leader of Umno and prime minister. MCPX

So just what is Mahathir sore about Abdullah?

mahathir hulu langat 120408 speech About Anwar, Mahathir had lied through his teeth first. Then he defended a rogue police chief for knocking the lights out of the former deputy. That was after he had Anwar thrown in jail by a High Court lined by his own handpicked judges. These judges, all of them, could never muster the courage to be professional men of law, men who should have known better that they are not the law nor above it.

Was Mahathir afraid Anwar was preparing to challenge him for the Umno presidency? Perhaps. At least that was the rumour then. It was a rumour that began inside Umno itself. As far as I can tell, it came from key players inside the Umno Supreme Council who were diehard Mahathir loyalists. Yet these individuals who had their own interests to protect. After all, they had become enormously wealthy under Mahathir's patronage system. That is how Mahathir kept power, and how he kept Umno as though power were his own, Umno his too, and the country as well.

For 22 years, Mahathir also kept Malaysians under his gaze, mostly by way of the Stalinist-style Internal Security Act. The Communist Party of China leadership and Kremlin would have been proud of Mahathir. They could induct him to their hall of fame. Mahathir had co-opted Anwar from Abim. But why Anwar joined Mahathir in his cabinet beggars belief. But as the maxim goes, power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Only Anwar, the Asian Renaissance man, and all the bollocks about Asian values that he had been peddling, found out the hard way how quickly he could be tossed out on his ear from Mahathir's kitchen cabinet.

That's where the problems begin for Mahathir over Abdullah. Abdullah's kitchen cabinet, and the power politics that reside inside the top echelon of Umno, the Supreme Council, where power corrupts and just about all of them in Umno by Mahathir. It's a system Mahathir created and owned, and the very one Abdullah adopted and has used since.

Passing of the Olympic torch

It's rather like the passing of the Olympic torch. Mahathir was Prometheus and his prime ministerial office Olympia. The Finance Ministry was the mint that made overnight multi millionaires and billionaires, and the Economic Planning Unit the dispenser of wealth to the Barisan Nasional's network of business and political cronies.

The patronage system that began soon after the May 13, 1969 race riots and the birthing of the New Economic Policy and all ensuing policies of Malay ultra-nationalism, became the

core of Umno's common sensibility. The kernel of that sensibility was control and corruption. It was a protection racket that Mahathir ran. It's a racket that Abdullah has been running since 2003.

There's one essential difference, though. Mahathir's protection racket enriched his ministers and their supporters, and in particular Malaysia's business cronies across all races, Abdullah's has been enriching the old cronies but especially the newer ones. It's the newer ones about whom Mahathir seems most sore. For the newer ones, under Abdullah's tutelage, are his immediate and extended family members. What's more, the state contracts that Mahathir had once handed out to his cronies, always on a silver platter, are no longer going to them under Abdullah. Or at least not in the same proportions as previously and in frequency.

NONE It is well documented that Mahathir was pretty sore that many of his pet projects were shelved soon after Abdullah took over from him. These were projects that would have directly benefited Mahathir's cronies. Not that those projects were shelved in their entirety. They were massaged by Abdullah and redistributed through the patronage system to a newer network of business cronies and the balance of Mahathir's own, who continued to pay tributes to Abdullah, as they had to Mahathir since the ex-dictator started a slew of privatisation projects in the 1980s.

Funny old world this. One can recall the way in which several Malay sultanates used to pay gold-leafed tributaries to the King of Siam who had threatened to raze those states. And how the sultans sought the protection of the Chinese.

Mahathir isn't wily; he's a bully. He's not brash; he's a braggart. He's an attention seeker. He thinks he's still important. He's not. He sees his legacy eroding quickly and ignominiously. Mahathir deserves ignominy. Every bit of it. He wielded overwhelming power, without any sense of justice and accountability. That's because the people dared not stand up to him in the way they have to Umno, to Barisan Nasional, in the last election. Now Umno, MCA, MIC and Gerakan are in a miserable flap over their relevance in this "new" political landscape.

The decimated Barisan Nasional has been frenetically chasing its own shortened tail that barely straddles between its short hind legs. In-fighting has quickly become a regular feature amongst them. The slap in the face was well deserved. It was a long time coming. But the humiliation should continue: Malaysians not the exalted politicians from the old/new opposition who suddenly find themselves in power in five states should keep the pressure up on all politicians to come clean at every turn.

Mahathir's problem is that the "new" Umno, which he had tried to create following the 1988 Constitutional crisis, is arguably on its last legs. This is precisely how his legacy is being shredded. Mahathir has no credibility. All the praise heaped on him, such as being the father of modern Malaysian development, is bunk. This is typical of Malaysians, with their provincialist and jingoistic mindsets, long fed by the state-controlled mass media and a seriously dumbed-down, worthless, and pathetically weak and farcical education system.

Shooting his mouth off

Mahathir's only resort, as it has always been, is to shoot his mouth off. Shooting his mouth off is nothing new for somebody with an ego bigger than the country. Mahathir thinks he is owed at least that much, by default, or by virtue of the praise heaped on him time and

again by the mindless and pitifully predictable local media editors.

These are businesses licensed by the state under very special conditions or laws. They are owned by rich businessmen who are connected to Mahathir and, by default, to the Barisan Nasional regime. They are financiers of these media businesses that, more than being incapable of telling the truth, more than being incapable of being watchdogs of a supposedly democratic system, are principally concerned with making supernormal profits. They are in the business of spin, for massaging the truth, by shaping the minds of Malaysians in ways drugs users' minds are shaped by mind-bending drugs.

As spiteful and hypocritical as Mahathir is, typically, he's disgusted by the manner in which the media he once had eating out of his hands, have now deserted him en masse. Quite literally, the tables have turned on him. The media have become less and less interested in him and his diatribe. There was a new master, Abdullah. So they were obligated to serve him, to cater to his whims, no matter how daft and hallucinatory these were.

Let Mahathir bark at Abdullah. Nobody cares. Both deserve each other, if nothing else. Wait: there is nothing else. They're not pitiable; they're pitiful. But so is Najib Abdul Razak. He can't wait for his day in the sun.

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