

**Dr Mahathir as Abdullah's bogeyman**  
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The Anwar-Najib succession saga has perhaps diverted attention from some of the legitimate undercurrents of Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's potential to build much of a legacy between now and his departure, whenever that may be. I believe Abdullah needs a real bogeyman – now more than ever, and it is neither one of his aforementioned competitors. It is, instead, a legacy.  
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You will recall that ex-dictator Mahathir launched some - at times self-damaging and embarrassing - attacks on Abdullah's leadership. While there has been at least one direct 'pow-wow' between the two to try and bury the hatchet, it's clear that there is no way this hatchet is getting buried any time soon.

But the Abdullah strategy did not change, which is certainly not about 'let sleeping dogs lie'. Instead, Abdullah's approach has been to basically publicly ignore his predecessor's pot shots and swipes and not give it the affirmation it seeks.

Is this the best way for Abdullah to continue to deal with one of his most visible nemesis? To be sure, while there have been setbacks, there is a case to be made that Abdullah's approach to handling the pressure from Mahathir has thus far partially worked for him. One might argue that Mahathir has gone from being a prominent voice in Umno to a voice in the wilderness outside Umno.

Many were too quick to write Abdullah's political obituary following March 8, and it obviously remains to be seen if he can survive the next Umno general assembly. However, one thing is clear: Mahathir has ostensibly played his trump card and Abdullah is still ticking along. If Mahathir's motive was to trigger an earthquake within Umno, and to provoke an instant crisis through a mass defection and resignation of its members, he has not succeeded.

Mind you, I'm not suggesting Mahathir has become inconsequential – especially as a disruptive force - just that he's never been more marginal to the centre of power than he is now.

I've always felt Abdullah would be well-served to take a more confident and assertive approach to dealing with Mahathir and some of the more visible abuses of the former dictator. To stem the tide of the fast growing disenchantment with his BN coalition will understandably be a key to Abdullah's survival.

To do so, his government must not only deliver on fundamental reforms, it must also abandon the continued arrogant style of dictating that was put in place during Mahathir's reign. To deliver on reforming much that is wrong with the way BN has governed, Abdullah must not only implement changes that may rub Mahathir the wrong way, he can further help his credibility by holding those responsible for abuses and wrongdoing accountable for their actions.

This means initiating a process of re-establishing the government's credibility by having a thorough and transparent series of reforms. For starters, there needs to be credible investigation and reform of the judiciary and an independent and constitutional review of

the ISA.

These measures will send a powerful signal of Abdullah's commitment to addressing apparent past misdeeds. The second part of this equation is where we get back to Mahathir. It is critical that Abdullah re-establish his reputation - and that of his government's - by ensuring that no stone is left unturned. Like others, Mahathir must also be called to account for his actions.

Sure, there are down sides to such an approach. Doing so could possibly trigger a serious internal power struggle within Umno and further undermine his position. But it is necessary. My assessment is it is worth it to Abdullah, otherwise he simply risks further loss of any credibility he and his regime has left with the general public.

Going after the insidious and much despised culture of cronyism through serious investigations of the judiciary and other government institutions - and to be able to politically tie that baggage to Mahathir's legacy - would be a political coup for Abdullah. He needs Mahathir now, more than ever, as a punching bag to have, in order to salvage himself and his government.

The old politics of whipping up the Umno base by indulging in racial politics, the rhetoric of Malay supremacy and such identity politics will not cut it this time. The public has seen that trick once too often.

Either way, it's evident that the stakes are high, but March 8 has made it imperative that to not directly confront the past - and Mahathir's legacy - will simply erode Abdullah's popularity. Indeed, he will pay the ultimate political price for Mahathir's debacles. So yes, from a purely Machiavellian stance, Abdullah would be better served to set up Mahathirism and Mahathir as the bogeyman, while steering clear of the old fashion Umno-style racial politics or trying to pin Anwar down.

So in my view, Abdullah has two likely options for the bogeyman he needs. One is an illusion and the other real. He could opt for the illusion - the usual phantom 'enemies' of Malay supremacy, or the real: the corrosive Mahathirism and his legacy.

The former option - of targeting the phantom enemies of Malay supremacy - will appeal to the racists, xenophobic, and parochial within Umno who always fall for and thrive on that kind of rhetoric; which incidentally, during his heyday, Mahathir used to thoroughly exploit for his own political ends. But it would simply show that this regime is no better than the past one.

The latter strategy for Abdullah, of going after the cronyism, arrogance and disregard for the public interest that was normalised under Mahathir's regime, will provide some hope and improve Abdullah's chances for salvaging himself and his government's hold on power and making the Anwar-Najib sideshow exactly that.

But of course there are no guarantees. After all, he was a part of that system as one of Mahathir's lieutenants. No doubt there would be no love lost between them if Abdullah does get more aggressive about dealing with the debilitating Mahathir legacy. Besides, I doubt if there's any love left between the two.