

Dr Mahathir back in spotlight after long exile
Malaysiakini.com
Nov 9, 2008

Former premier Dr Mahathir Mohamad is enjoying a surge in influence as a new administration prepares to take power, according to pundits who fear a return to hardline "Mahathirism".

The grand old man of Malaysian politics endured a humiliating exile from the circles of power after stepping down in 2003, as he was punished for feuding with his hand-picked successor Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

Mahathir, still feisty despite his 83 years and a string of heart problems, was outraged by the dismantling of his pet projects and seemingly made it his mission to bring down the mild-mannered Abdullah.

Last month, he declared victory as the unpopular premier was forced to announce he would depart in March 2009 in favour of Deputy Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak, whom Mahathir had publicly championed for the top job.

"The country is witnessing the return of Mahathirism with the former prime minister seen as having become the single most powerful and influential individual" in the ruling party, said opposition veteran Lim Kit Siang.

He said Mahathir was transformed from a troublemaker to a "king-maker" the moment Abdullah caved in, after months of turmoil in the wake of disastrous general election results.

During his years in the wilderness Mahathir complained the ruling party had ordered the government-linked press not to air his views and said it had even leaned on organisations to withdraw invitations for him to events.

But as the power balance shifted, Mahathir has been brought back into the fold of the Umno which leads the coalition - feted at party events and once again revelling in media attention.

Back to old ways

Now there are rumblings that some of the worst aspects of his two-decade rule - repression, media censorship and the use of draconian internal security laws - could be revived.

"Najib's policies will mirror those of Mahathir's," said Zaid Ibrahim, a cabinet minister who resigned in September and who sees the hand of the new administration in a recent rash of detentions under internal security laws.

"Abdullah doesn't have that in him. On his own he would not have done it, so he must be under tremendous pressure. Those measures taken are an indication of what's to come," he told AFP.

Zaid, a maverick figure who quit the cabinet after being blocked from cleaning up the judiciary and police, said that Abdullah's mild approach had allowed a measure of freedom in Malaysia.

"It is true that he has not done much to effect the reforms that he talked about, but Abdullah did give the space - there's a certain openness, people do express a lot more - and it will be a loss if we go back to the old ways."

Friends in high places

Political analysts say that while Najib will run his own ship, he will be careful not to alienate Mahathir and trigger another destructive slanging match of the kind which helped fell Abdullah.

"Mahathir probably will not have an official role (in the new government) because that would raise too many eyebrows and too many questions would be asked," said Tricia Yeoh from the Centre for Public Policy Studies.

"But I am quite sure that he will be informally consulted time and again," she said.

With Najib in the top job, flanked by another Mahathir protege Muhyiddin Yassin, who is slated to be deputy premier, and possibly Mahathir's son Mukhriz, who is contesting the influential post of Youth wing chief, the ex-premier will again have friends in high places.

Zaid said that Mahathir's hardline style is attractive to Umno politicians who have been in disarray since the elections which lost the coalition its two-thirds majority in parliament for the first time.

"Mahathir has his strong points too. As much as I disagree with him on many issues, I also admire his tenacity and consistency. He is a very forceful leader, so people gravitate around that," Zaid said.

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