

Proxy fight between Pak Lah and Mahathir
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A new generation of leaders in Malaysia is fighting for control of the ruling party - in disarray since heavy election losses - with the premier's son-in-law battling his predecessor's son.

The successors of current leader Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and former premier Mahathir Mohamad are shaping up to continue hostilities that have raged between the two veterans for the past few years.

After disastrous election results in March, Abdullah has been forced to stand down early next year, unleashing an unprecedented contest for top posts in Umno.

Drawing intense interest is the tussle for the influential role of youth wing chief - a nurturing ground for future leaders.

Abdullah's son-in-law is pitted against Mahathir's son, in a fight that could determine which of the rival clans will control Malaysia's future.

The two patriarchs have had a very public falling-out since the 2003 leadership handover, and Mahathir's constant sniping is one of the major factors behind Abdullah's impending departure.

"It is obvious that the person who wins will determine whether the party's future will be more aligned to Abdullah or Mahathir, as they have each got their favourite proxy in the race," said Tricia Yeoh from the Centre for Public Policy Studies.

Mukhriz Mahathir, a sophisticated 44-year-old businessman, is the front-runner for the Youth chief job.

His father will forever be remembered as the man whose two-decade rule brought prosperity to Malaysia, transforming a tropical backwater into one of Southeast Asia's most prosperous nations.

But Mukhriz says he is his own man and is looking to reform the youth movement, which along with the ruling party has lost much support and credibility over the years.

"One of the reasons we were rejected in the last general elections and recent by-elections was the perception that we misuse, worse still abuse, our positions in government for political purposes," he told AFP.

"So I want an arm's-length relationship between the party and the government."

The Umno-led coalition, which has run Malaysia since independence in 1957, suffered its worst-ever setback in March elections, losing five states and a third of parliamentary seats - effectively ending Abdullah's career.

Meteoric rise of son-in-law

Abdullah had been criticised as weak and ineffective, but many Malaysians believe a major factor in his downfall was the antics of his 32-year-old son-in-law Khairy Jamaluddin.

The Oxford-educated Khairy was an aide to Abdullah before marrying the boss's daughter in 2001, sending him on a meteoric rise that landed him the deputy Youth chief position in 2004.

Eloquent and expensively dressed, Khairy (far left in photo) cuts an impressive figure but his naked ambition and alleged influence with his father-in-law have seen him vilified on political websites and in

water-cooler gossip.

Mahathir has accused Abdullah of pandering to the demands of Khairy, whom he said was influencing government policy, contracts and appointments - charges he denies.

"I've gotten used to it. As far as I'm concerned, nobody has substantiated any of this innuendo with any facts or evidence, I have consistently denied it but people persist on perpetuating this perception," Khairy told AFP.

Khairy, who also has big reform plans for Umno Youth, says his reputation has been unfairly smeared.

"I'm not merely up against Mukhriz. There looms behind him someone, something, much larger. That is exactly what I'm up against," he said.

"Mahathir has... openly campaigned for Mukhriz, has repeatedly criticised and denigrated me and who am I when compared to Mahathir? He is a statesman and a PM of 22 years and I'm just starting off in politics."

With Abdullah almost out of the picture, Khairy's star may be fading but analysts say that in the arcane business of Umno internal politics, Mukhriz cannot yet count on victory.

"But whatever the outcome, it will finally determine whether Mahathir or Abdullah has the last say," said Yeoh.

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