

Dr Mahathir expects 'firm' leadership from new PM
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The rise to power of Malaysia's next leader Najib Razak has been overshadowed by allegations he will crack down on dissent, reverting to the hardline tactics of former premier Mahathir Mohamad.

Recent moves including the use of tear gas to break up a rally by opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim, and the banning of the opposition's two main newspapers, have triggered talk of a return to "Mahathirism".

But Mahathir himself, a feisty 84-year-old who remains a colossus of Malaysian politics six years after retirement, is unconcerned about his name being used as a byword for repression.

And he said in an interview with AFP that he expects Najib to be a much more assertive leader than Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who resigns on Thursday after a lacklustre term in which he allowed a little more democratic space, but failed to implement promised reforms including combating corruption.

"If he feels he has enough strength, I think he will be more firm. Not necessarily oppressive but firm in his decision and his acts," Mahathir said of 55-year-old Najib who spent the past six years as deputy premier.

"Of course, people are wanting to call this Mahathirism. I'm quite aware of that but I don't care whether people call me a dictator or not. In any case, I'm the first dictator who resigned of his own accord," he said.

Dr Mahathir justifies mass detentions

Mahathir justified controversial acts during his term in power, including mass detentions of political opponents and rights activists under internal security laws, as being aimed at preserving peace.

"This country needs a firm hand because we have the potential for racial pressures, and it has not happened in this country because the government was strong and knows how far people should play around with sensitive issues."

After deciding to step down, ending more than two decades in power, Mahathir hand-picked his successor but became enraged when Abdullah began dismantling mega-projects close to his heart.

After disastrous elections a year ago, the veteran leader stepped up his attacks, slating Abdullah as weak and accusing him of nepotism and corruption, helping force him into an early retirement.

Mahathir ridiculed suggestions that Abdullah has allowed Malaysians a measure more freedom, by giving the government-linked mainstream press more room to operate and tolerating a little more dissent.

"What has happened is that Abdullah has got no power to administer this country. His tendency is to bow to the opposition. He doesn't want to be all this 'free' and all that, but he feels he doesn't have enough support to be strong," he said.

Najib didn't do well as No 2

Mahathir also had sharp words for Najib, who was once his protege but disappointed the grand old man of Malaysian politics when he refused to oppose Abdullah's policies or campaign openly for him to quit.

"Unfortunately as a second man (deputy) he hasn't performed very well. His tendency is just to follow

blindly his leader," he said.

"It doesn't speak well of a leader who allows himself to be so overawed by his superior."

Najib on Saturday hit out at accusations that he will be a hardline leader, as well as opposition attempts to paint him as corrupt, and link him with the sensational murder of a Mongolian woman,

"They are malicious, baseless lies. I have given my replies but they persist because it a ploy by the opposition," he said. "Give me a chance, judge me by my actions, don't judge me on rumours and baseless allegations.

Mahathir quit the ruling party Umno last year in protest over Abdullah's leadership, but said on the weekend that he has decided to rejoin, ensuring he will continue to play a prominent role on the Malaysian political stage.

He made a surprise entry on the last day of the Umno annual general assembly where he was greeted on stage by top party leaders which included an awkward half-hug with his successor-turn-nemesis Abdullah.

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