AP row tearing apart mentor and protege

ANALYSIS BY JOCELINE TAN

HE was a father figure, even a mentor of sorts, to her.

And she was his *anak mas* or blue-eyed girl.

But the relationship between the mentor and *anak mas* seems to have crumbled after Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's open denunciation of Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz at a press conference a day after returning from overseas.

"Dr Mahathir has taken it a step further. It is now a very public quarrel," said an analyst.

The former premier was one very angry man. He was upset over the "ousting" of Proton CEO Tan Sri Tengku Mahaleel Tengku Ariff and he was seething over what he claimed were misleading statements by Rafldah over the AP list.

But over and above the anger was an unmistakable sense of concern over Proton Holdings, the national car industry that was his brainchild and baby.

It was clear that he had followed the AP issue from abroad even though he was absent from the recent Umno general assembly for the first time in more than 30 years.

Shortly after landing at Subang airport on Sunday, he told a close friend that he had "saved Rafidah three times" in the past, the implication being that he expected more respect from the International Trade and Industry Minister.

But he was no longer interested in an apology.

He seemed well past that stage or as Deputy Information Minister Datuk Zainuddin Maidin put it, *"nasi sudah jadi bubur"* (it was too late because rice had become porridge).

"People are already eating the *bubur,"* said Zainuddin.

Dr Mahathir claimed he was only interested in painting a true picture of the AP issue.

Even Rafidah was reportedly on tenterhooks in Pretoria where she was part of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's delegation to South Africa, pressuring her officials for information even as the press conference was going on in Kuala Lumpur.

The question is what next? The ball is in Rafidah's court.

Most quarters feel that she had not explained the AP issue and its impact on the national car well.

The spotlight has been on Rafidah and her former boss but the solution may be determined by her present boss

Her own party members made that clear enough when they heckled her at the assembly last weekend.

Besides, she is now being accused of having misled Umno on the AP issue, which is serious given that she is such a high-ranking party official.

"Rafidah will have to respond. She still has a lot to explain," said supreme council member Datuk Shahrir Samad.

However, the Wanita Umno leader who is still in South Africa was in no mood to reply except for a terse "God is my witness. I have no comment."

"If her reply at the Umno assembly was comprehensive. Dr Mahathir would not have to come out this way," said Shahrir.

It is apparent now that her former mentor will be pursuing the issue to some sort of a conclusion.

Dr Mahathir had ended his Monday press conference with the promise of a more "detailed explanation on the correspondence between the various parties".

Those close to him suggest that the "correspondence" refers to the explanation letter Rafidah sent him three weeks ago on the instruction of the Cabinet. Apparently, the "correspondence" measures up to a thick wedge of papers that is about 6cm high.

It is possible Dr Mahathir intends to highlight it part by part or, as he put it, in instalments, while raising questions about its content

Dr Mahathir has also questioned why only the 2005 AP list was released whereas the AP list for previous years were held back.

This has raised all sorts of speculation about possible names on the list, prompting deputy Umno Youth chief Khairy Jamaluddin to declare that he is not and has never been a recipient of any AP.

But those who have access to the 2004 list suggest that the recipients were the same, but the number of APs awarded to them varied.

And if that is not enough, Tengku Mahaleel himself has some stories to tell which he is not telling yet.

The issue is far from over and the controversy has grown too complex for any simple solution.

It involves two prominent and headstrong personalities over an issue that has national repercussions.

One is an iconic figure who was prime minister for 22 years and the other is the longest serving trade minister and leader of some 1.5 million women in Umno.

Meanwhile, journalists have been trailing Rafidah at almost every step of her way on the South Africa trip.

But she has told them to "ask the Prime Minister".

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