

Has Dr M gone too far this time?

IT LOOKS like Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad has decided to burn his bridges.

The former premier's latest comments about the Abdullah administration, or more specifically, about his successor seem to suggest he has reached a sort of political point-of-no-return.

He not only lashed out at the policies of Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, but has gone as far as to declare that Abdullah was not his first choice.

Abdullah, he said, was actually his second choice.

His statement was staggering and sent shock waves through a good number of Malaysians, particularly through the rank and file of Umno.

Some think it was not an uncontrolled outburst but a calculated statement aimed at pushing his dissatisfaction with the affairs of state to another level.

He was so cool at the press conference that gave rise to yesterday's stunning headlines, looking polished in a steel-grey bush suit and with not a hair out of place.

Dr Mahathir has done press interviews so many times that there is no question he is not ready for. And he fielded every question so matter-of-factly that it took a few seconds for the gravity of his words to sink in for some of the journalists present.

He was probably well aware of the implications of coming out so aggressively and directly against Abdullah and his administration. He was, after all, in power for 22 years.

But the power of incumbency, as former deputy prime minister Tun Musa Hitam once said, should never be underestimated.

As expected, Cabinet members, state leaders and Umno leaders have rallied behind the Prime Minister, declaring their loyalty to him and defending him and his policies.

One of those who have come out strongly for Abdullah has been Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak, who is currently on an official visit to India.

The pressure was on Najib to take the lead in showing his support for the Prime Minister, but as one of his aides said, "he would have done it even if he wasn't asked".

"The DPM's stand is clear - undivided loyalty to the PM and respect for the former PM. Pak Lah leads the government of the day while Dr Mahathir has done big things for which we are grateful," said Razak Baginda who heads a think-tank linked to Najib.

But generally, many of those who are part of the Government today are highly uncomfortable with the way Dr Mahathir has forced the issue.



ANALYSIS

By JOCELINE TAN

Many of them owe their upward career path to him but they also owe where they are today to Abdullah who has his own style and set of priorities.

They admit Dr Mahathir has the right to air his views, but in a constructive way and in the manner of an elder statesman.

Some feel his remarks about his successor have been more akin to that of the political opposition. His views, they feel, have also grown increasingly personal and cutting.

What he said on Wednesday was perhaps the deepest cut.

It amounted to disowning his choice of successor and was as good as a severing of ties.

But can one disown one's own decision without casting some aspersions on oneself?

Does the admission of a poor decision also not reflect on the decision-maker?

And as many have pointed out, he chose Abdullah but since then, Abdullah has gone on to secure a convincing mandate of his own from the people.

They feel Dr Mahathir does not seem to acknowledge this important factor in his verdict on the present Government.

Some think Dr Mahathir is trying to provoke a reaction from Abdullah.

Abdullah is unlikely to react in haste.

From day one, he has not said anything, partly out of respect for his predecessor and partly because it is not in his nature to fight a war of words.

But those close to him said that Dr Mahathir had simply reached the end of his tether and the cancellation of the bridge project in Johor was the proverbial last straw.

"You people have no idea how strongly he felt about Singapore and the bridge. Tun feels that since he can no longer canvass for votes from the Umno leadership, he will do it through the masses who read the news," said a Mahathir loyalist.

Malaysians knew that Dr Mahathir would be a tough act to follow and pity the man who has to fill his shoes. And not many expected him to let go completely, knowing his indomitable will and sheer force of personality.

But few thought that he would take on his successor and the Government this way. Is it possible he has gone too far this time?