

In Malaysia, nostalgia grows for the days of Mahathir

By Thomas Fuller

KUALA LUMPUR: The annual meeting of Malaysia's governing party is known for fiery talk and dramatic gestures, like the time during last year's conference when a high-ranking member brandished a sword to make a point from the podium.

But when the doors to the conference open next week, the party's most outspoken member will not be speaking. In fact, he may not even be attending.

Mahathir bin Mohamad, who stepped down as prime minister, three years ago but now is the biggest critic of his handpicked successor, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, says he has not yet made up his mind.

"I may even be expelled from the

Criticism of Abdullah is garnering support

party," Mahathir said in an interview.

Mahathir's attacks on the government — in the interview he lashed out at everything from its economic policies to what he calls the prime minister's short attention span — are seen by many as a self-serving and inelegant Coda to a long, visionary career.

Yet many Malaysians say they wish Mahathir would be allowed to stir things up at the party congress. The former prime minister's campaign against the government is eliciting increasing levels of sympathy and support here from investment bankers,

lawyers and other Malaysians dismayed that the government lacks a coherent long-term plan for the economy and has not delivered on its promises to clean up corruption.

Even Anwar Ibrahim, the former deputy prime minister who was fired, jailed and beaten in prison during Mahathir's rule, said the government was not paying enough attention to Mahathir's criticisms.

"He has brought up some very key substantive issues that include allegations of a police state, rampant corruption, cronyism, abuse of power and a media that is not free," Anwar said in a telephone interview.

"People ridicule this and say all

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Mahathir keeps up the pressure on his successor

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these things were his policies, too. But notwithstanding that, you have to reply," Anwar said. "There is a failure on the part of Abdullah and the present administration to address the substantive criticisms by Mahathir, which I think to an extent are legitimate criticisms."

After he dominated politics here for 22 years and shaped the destiny of modern Malaysia, Mahathir's voice cannot be ignored, analysts said.

During an interview at his 86th-floor office in the Petronas Towers, Mahathir gestures toward the vertiginous vista of the modern city that he helped build: skyscrapers and an elegantly landscaped park rimmed by luxury hotels.

He complains that the government is not spending enough on infrastructure and is letting the economy sag. "All these new buildings that you see were actually approved during my time," Mahathir said without a trace of self-effacement.

Abdullah is handing out contracts to friends and family, Mahathir complained. And he is abdicating Malaysia's role as a spokesman for the Third World. He should either change course or step down, Mahathir said.

"He need not go if he is willing to do what is right," Mahathir said. "Of course if he is not willing then I think

he should not stand in the way of the country's continued development."

A government official who works with Abdullah said the prime minister was traveling in Pakistan and unable to respond. But the official dismissed Mahathir's comments as a "distraction."

"The prime minister was elected by the people," said the official, who requested anonymity because he is not authorized to speak on behalf of the government. "Ultimately his future should be determined by the people who put him in office rather than the wants of one man."

After Abdullah's three years in power, Malaysians admire him for allowing more debates about sensitive issues such as race and religion. "He loosened up control," said Sankara Nair, an activist lawyer. "People feel more free to express their views."

Abdullah is also credited with making some basic government services like passport issuance more efficient and easing the reins on the judiciary.

But there is also frustration among everyone from bankers to taxi drivers that Abdullah does not have the same vision for the future that Mahathir did.

"The man on the street is saying, 'Where is the economy heading?'" Sankara said.

In his quest to challenge or ultimately unseat Abdullah, some of Mahathir's

difficulties are of his own making: Abdullah remains relatively secure as president of the party partly because Mahathir made it more difficult to oust the party leadership during his own reign.

"None of the cabinet ministers are willing to abandon Abdullah — they know the consequences," said P. Ramasamy, a political science professor based in Singapore. Siding with Mahathir would mean dismissal and cutting themselves off from lucrative contracts, he said.

What may be troubling for Abdullah, Ramasamy said, is that some of Mahathir's criticisms are sticking. In a sign that he may fear a challenge to his position, Abdullah recently postponed party elections that were to be held next year.

"Mahathir may not have the power to remove him but he has done a lot of damage to Abdullah Badawi. The prime minister's credibility is at stake," Ramasamy said.

Mahathir holds no post in the United Malays National Organization, the party that leads the country's coalition government, and he failed in a recent attempt to win election as a delegate to the general assembly next week. He can attend in his capacity as a former president of the party, but that does not give him the right to speak.

At 81 years old, Mahathir walks more slowly than he used to. He travels fre-

quently, but he enters the back seat of his chauffeured cars carefully and deliberately; doctors told him recently that he has three blockages in his heart.

Yet Mahathir retains his feisty, acerbic style. He complains that he is being blocked by the police from meeting with supporters, repeating his claim that Malaysia is a "police state."

"Muzzled," he said. "I can't talk to anybody. If I talk to the mainstream press it is either not published or it is spun in a way that makes me look bad."

After an hourlong interview it is difficult to know what exactly spurred this former medical doctor to jump back into politics. He said he was bothered most by the sway that Abdullah's son-in-law, Khairy Jamaluddin, has over policy and the awarding of contracts. But he was also worried about preserving his legacy and continuing his aggressive building program of highways, bridges and ports.

But Mahathir does not seem prepared to abandon the fight. Asked whether the idea of a quiet retirement — John Grisham novels on the beach and quality time with grandchildren — tempts him, he responded without hesitation.

"No, I think I have an obligation to the country and to the people," he said. "I don't care much about what happens to me."