

Mahathir fights for peace

The Sydney Morning Herald - October 11, 2006

Mahathir Mohamad is a political brawler who doesn't know when to quit.

He's pugnacious, combative and refuses to accept his time may have passed. So when his name comes up in conversation, peacemaker is not the first word that springs to mind. It's been three years since he retired as the Malaysian prime minister. But he remains in the spotlight. Earlier this year he alienated Malaysia's political elite by saying his former protege, the Prime Minister, Abdullah Badawi, is unfit to lead the country.

In 22 years in power, Dr Mahathir never tired of berating Australia and its neo-colonial ways. John Howard was singled out. Recalcitrant, as Paul Keating once said, isn't the half of it. So, eyebrows were raised when it was revealed by the Sydney Morning Herald that the peacemaker at the centre of 14 months of secret dialogue meetings between Thai Muslim insurgent leaders and the military was none other than the old brawler himself.

The issue on the table is to find a peaceful solution for insurgent unrest in Thailand's three majority Muslim southern provinces, Yala, Pattani and Narathiwat, where more than 1700 people have died since 2004. Under the confrontational leadership of Thailand's former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra - who was deposed in a bloodless military coup last month - the number of violent incidents surged, raising fears of an intractable long-term conflict.

For outsiders, Dr Mahathir might seem an unlikely agent for peace but there is method in the madness. He is a respected regional Islamic leader who has always championed the rights of Malays, who are Muslim. The Thai Muslims are also ethnic Malays.

Therefore, who better to bang sense into the heads of warring factions in Thailand's serious civil unrest. In early meetings with insurgent leaders, the fiery old politician, now 81, spelled out the facts of life: Thailand will never give up territory to them. Face that, he said, and instead aim for what can be achieved: an end to injustice, more Muslim representation in government, an investment in education, and optional use of the Malay language (now banned) in schools. Dr Mahathir claims his mission had been endorsed by Thailand's revered King Bhumibol Adulyadej, so criticism of his actions have been tempered on that side of the border.

No one would dare openly criticise an initiative of the king. The result of the dialogue meetings - the Southern Thailand Peace and Development proposal - was handed to the Malaysian and Thai governments in August. Dr Mahathir's greatest achievement may be in getting the two parties to trust each other enough to tell each other what they want. Now his work is done, he says, adding a kicker: unless someone asks him to go on with it. The old fighter is still not quite ready to quit.