

No compromise on loyalty

The Star - 13/5/2007.

No one tells Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad what he can or cannot do but even his staunchest supporters in Umno are concerned about what they see as his overtures to the opposition parties. As much as they idolise him, they draw the line when it comes to the political opposition.



INSIGHT
JOCELINE TAN

newsdesk@thestar.com.my

KOTA BARU is such an easy-going sort of town that Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad appeared a little overdressed in his immaculately tailored Nehru suit.

But he looked so debonair that all eyes were drawn to him. Besides, he was in greater shape than those seated with him on the stage.

On one side of the former Premier were the incomparable Kelantan prince Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah and the even more incomparable Tan Sri Abdullah Ahmad, the former MP better known as "Dollah Kok Lanas".

On the other side were Datuk Ibrahim Ali, who was sacked from Umno several years ago but has not given up on politics, and two Kelantan Umno old-timers, Tan Sri Mohamed Yaakob and Tan Sri Hussein Ahmad.

Mohamed was the Mentri Besar when Kelantan fell to PAS, and Hussein, a former MP, was once so strikingly handsome that people called him Sri Rama, after the hero in the famous wayang kulit drama Hikayat Sri Rama.

All very colourful characters, some still in currency, some past their prime, but all looking so cosy together on the same stage that afternoon.

The event was a talk organised by the pro-royalist Kelantan People's Action Council headed by Ibrahim. Some say Ibrahim, who has an axe to grind with Umno, is using Dr Mahathir for his own purposes but there is probably something symbiotic going on there.

It is ironic that Dr Mahathir should be so desirable to this pro-royalist group after the way he clipped the wings of the royals.

The hall was not filled like the first time he spoke in Kota Baru. The audience then had included Mentri Besar Datuk Nik Aziz Nik Mat and other top PAS politicians.

Dr Mahathir's stamina was pretty amazing and he was on his feet at the rostrum for almost two hours. It was quite familiar fare — off-the-cuff, a little rambling and targeted mainly at Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

But he said several things that raised eyebrows even among his most fervent supporters in Umno.

He said he wanted Umno to win but that it would not be surprising if PAS won again in Kelantan because they had been in power since 1990. He also said people deserved the leaders they elected and Umno should focus on defending its national seat of power.

This, coming on the heels of his remarks during the Ijok by-election that there was a need for a stronger opposition, gave the impression that he seemed to be edging closer to the other side.

PAS has been quick to capitalise on it and party vice-president Datuk Husam Musa, who has taken to calling Dr Mahathir "my good friend," said politics should not be dominated by one party and asked people to think about "Tun Mahathir's advice".

Politics does make for strange bedfellows.

Said Umno man and die-hard admirer Zakhir Mohamed: "I agree with Tun on many things but I'm worried about where he's heading. When we met him in December, he talked about saving Umno. But what he's saying now may hurt Umno."

Dr Mahathir enjoys respect in Umno. When he speaks they listen, and they see him as a fearless voice on national and international issues.



Crossing the line: Dr Mahathir enjoys respect in Umno but supporters and admirers alike in the party draw the line when it comes to siding with the opposition.

But supporters and admirers alike in the party draw the line when it comes to siding with the opposition.

"Younger Umno members like me are open-minded about criticism especially from a party elder but we are 100% loyal to the party," said PJ Utara Umno Youth vice-head Mohd Ezan Taib.

At the height of the Mahathir-Abdullah feud, the Youth wing caused ripples when it invited Tun Mahathir to speak at a forum.

Mohd Ezan said they were not taking sides but were merely unhappy over the disrespect some Umno quarters had shown the former Premier.

"Tun will always be special but we hope he won't go beyond the party line," he said.

And Dr Mahathir does get special treatment.

When the private jet he came in landed at the Kota Baru airport, the silver Mercedes Benz fetching him was allowed to cruise right up to the plane to pick him.

Earlier, several members of a bomb squad had meticulously swept the car for devices, one going under the car and another almost crawling into the boot. The police were not taking chances after the pepper spray incident on his last trip to Kelantan.

Datuk Mukhriz Mahathir insisted his father is very much an Umno and Barisan Nasional loyalist.

"He does not campaign for the opposition. He has had a long history of fighting them and there's no love lost there. His grouse is with the top leadership and that's where it

ends.

"There's nothing I can do to stop him from speaking his mind nor do I intend to do so. It's his right to say what he thinks about issues," said Mukhriz, an Umno Youth exco member.

The transition, said Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar, has been more difficult for Dr Mahathir than Abdullah.

"Umno is in a strong position but any action that attempts to undermine the strength can affect the final result in the general election. It's not wise to go along this line and Umno members will have to draw the line at advocating a stronger opposition.

"An Umno man who does not want a strong majority for the party is a contradiction," said Syed Hamid.

Dr Mahathir's latest interview with *Malaysiakini* is likely to ruffle more feathers. He is clearly trying to drive a wedge between Abdullah and his deputy Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak apart from his indictment of the very ministers he had retained in his Cabinet all those years.

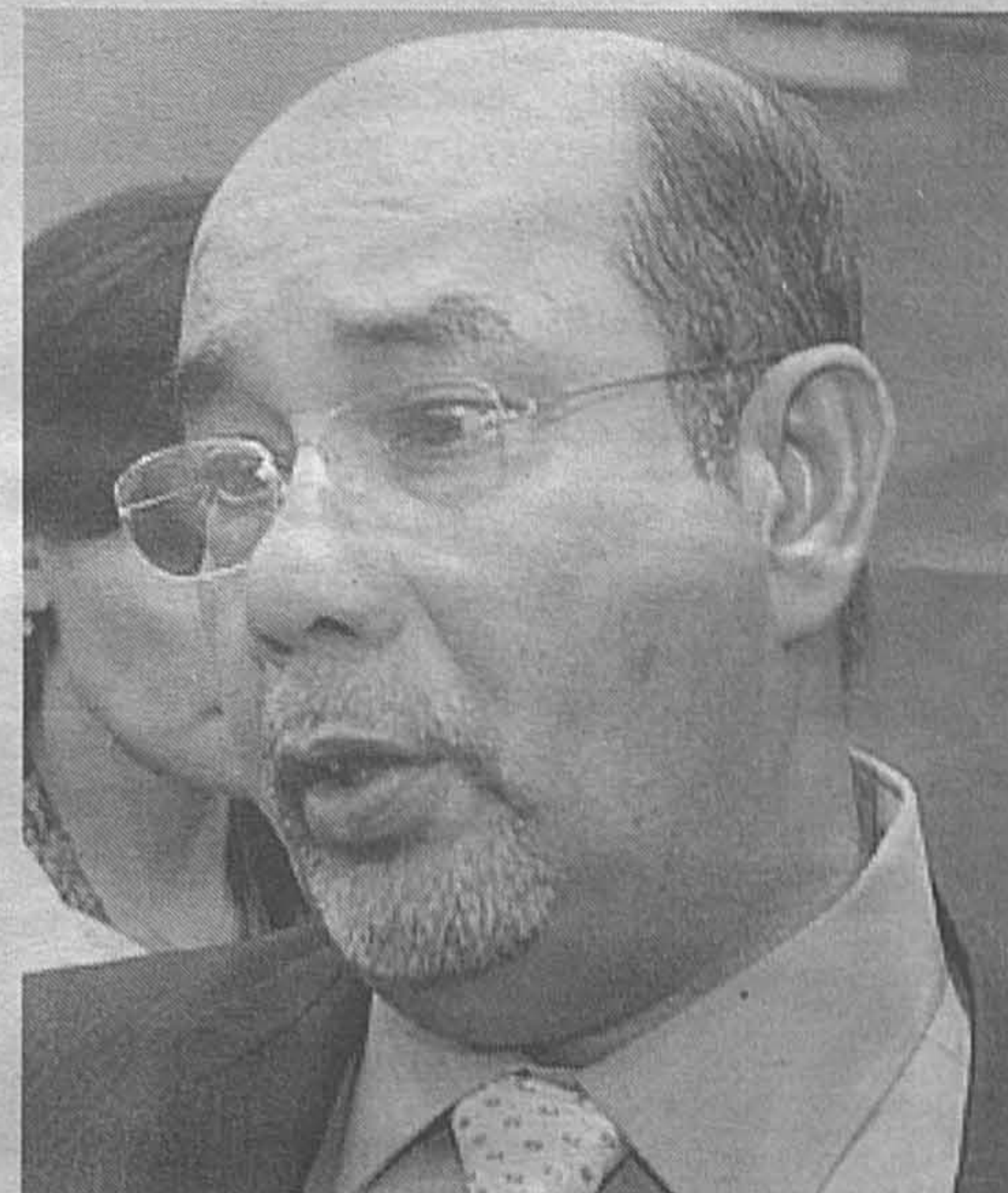
His attacks basically boil down to Abdullah-bashing. It says a great deal about Abdullah, the way he has put up with the criticism.

"I don't think Pak Lah has been diminished by the attacks. Pak Lah has shown restraint and accommodation in letting Tun express his views," said one Malay consultant.

For a great part of Dr Mahathir's 22 years at the top, he was Umno and Umno was him. As such, it is not easy to now persuade members that when he attacks Abdullah he is



Mohd Ezan: 'Tun will always be special but we hope he won't go beyond the line'



Syed Hamid: 'Contradiction if an Umno man does not want a strong majority'

attacking the president, and not the party.

For the average Umno member, loyalty to the party also means loyalty to the leadership.

Dr Mahathir talks a lot of sense but the trouble is that no matter how sensible he sounds, it still jars with contradictions when juxtaposed with the things he had condoned during his years in power.

The Malay intellectual Rustam A. Sani wrote with his usual eloquence about these contradictions in his blog last month, lamenting, "why so many people still want to listen to the man, and listen to him with all seriousness, is simply beyond me."

Abdullah continues to be stoic about it except when the accusations touch on his family.

He does not want to retaliate against the man who put him there in the first place. Also, two of Dr Mahathir's predecessors died outside of Umno because of disputes with him. Abdullah has no wish to see Dr Mahathir anywhere but inside Umno.

Just how long more will Dr Mahathir go on this way?

"I don't think he is going to stop anytime soon," said Syed Hamid.

Nor can anyone really stop this iconoclastic man who has, in his time, taken on figures from the formidable Lee Kuan Yew to the less formidable George W. Bush.

Like Singapore's Lee, he has ridden the tiger and come out victorious. But that was when he was still holding the reins of power.

These days, as he said somewhat tongue-in-cheek last weekend, he is a "pensioner."