

TUN Dr Mahathir Mohamad seemed rather amused as he took in the large press corps before him.

Beside him on the cream brocade sofa was the brilliant financier George Soros whom Dr Mahathir had once called a "moron."

Soros, who had also once called Dr Mahathir "a menace to his own country," was probably less amused than surprised at the interest in his meeting with the former Premier.

It was Dr Mahathir's first press conference since his heart attack last month and he looked markedly slimmer. He had obviously shed some weight and his steel-grey bush-suit hung a little loosely on his slight frame.

But he looked well. In fact, at 81, he looked a good decade younger than Soros' 76 years.

Soros looked rather casual in an open necked shirt and suit.

According to Dr Mahathir's daughter Datuk Paduka Marina who sat in on the meeting, Soros arrived late because he could not find his tie!

The one-time adversaries had spent an intellectually stimulating one-hour together and shook hands not once but twice for the cameras.

They seemed to have let bygones be bygones. Dr Mahathir admitted he had been wrong about the Jewish billionaire and both even shared like views on the future of world peace.

The reaction of many to news of the meeting was how they wished Dr Mahathir could have a similar happy-ending meeting with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

If he can reconcile with Soros why not with Abdullah, many had asked.

The dispute between Dr Mahathir and Abdullah is not closed but it has settled into a welcomed calm.

But key Umno politicians privy to the Prime Minister's feelings do not see reconciliation on the cards.

"When Tun started criticising the family members of Pak Lah, that was very personal and going too far for Pak Lah," said one top Umno figure.

Besides, there has been a clear turning point in favour of Abdullah. Not many people may have realised it but it happened during the Umno general assembly.

"Delegates refrained from the Tun issue. It was not just about party discipline but they know who is the boss in the party. The clout of the party president was on display," said Kedah politician Guntor Tobeng.

Two main factors contributed to this turning point.

One was that the party members really wanted to preserve party unity and to move on from the uncertainty of the last few months. The other was the fact that Dr Mahathir took to the sickbed just days before the assembly and that altered the scenario.

The Gods, as some said, smiled on the Umno president.

The quarrel has been distracting but a sense of pragmatism has also settled among party members.

"Umno cannot change president just because the ex-president disapproves of him," said a former ministerial aide.

The squabble, said the former aide, has been as bruising for Dr Mahathir as it has been for those on the receiving end.

Dr Mahathir was driven by his

Squabble a turning point for Pak Lah

There is no closure in sight to the dispute between Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi but there has been a clear turning point in favour of the Prime Minister and he is here to stay, writes JOCELINE TAN

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such a powerful mandate and that gave the team a huge boost. They were coasting for a while.

"But the criticism created a degree of anxiety and pressure for the team. It forced them to work extremely hard to clear the blockages and to deliver. They are now so much more focused on securing the economic programme and targets."

The good thing, said the political insider, is that even under all that pressure, Abdullah respected the process of democracy and did not use the Internal Security Act. He should be commended for that.

Dr Mahathir returned to his office routine a week ago and the Soros meeting was his first high-profile event.

His family is concerned that he should not submit to an over-strenuous diary.

"The heart attack is God's little warning to take it easy. I had a long conversation with him last Saturday. There was no more talk about things that had previously occupied him except his concern about Proton.

"He's been spending time on his memoirs, trying to remember events in the right sequence, people and details," said his son Datuk Mokhzani.

Mokhzani's younger brother Datuk Mukhriz said the family wants the elder statesman to cut back on his travelling which they think was the chief factor behind his attack.

"He has to be more home-based now," said Mukhriz.

But he seems to have made a remarkable recovery.

His nutritionist recently reported to the family that the Tun's blood sugar level was normal and so was his cholesterol and blood pressure.

The nutritionist said their father also had unusual levels of growth hormones.

"According to the doctors, his biological and chronological ages do not match. Biologically he is only about 65 although chronologically he is already 81," said Mokhzani.

Dr Mahathir has also gone back to horse-riding.

Said Mokhzani: "Don't ask me how but that's my father."

He uses the treadmill religiously everyday, doing an hour of brisk walking or light jogging.

His diet is now healthier thanks to the personal chef the family engaged a year ago.

Dr Mahathir has cut back on his carbohydrate intake and takes more vegetables. Although he has a life-long dislike for fish, he takes sushi which, said Mukhriz, is "as fishy as he can get."

Mukhriz, an Umno Youth exco member, has also "made peace" with his party president.

He met Abdullah in a four-eyed meeting during which he apologised for his action during the Umno general assembly and offered his side of the story.

The Mahathir siblings still hope to see some kind of reconciliation but said Mokhzani: "I don't know what lies ahead but my father has other things on his mind."

It is unlikely that people will welcome more uncertainty on the horizon now that the economic map has been clearly drawn out and national projects are about to take off.

And if the team around Abdullah works really hard and delivers, his fortuitous turning point can only turn into a real and permanent gain.

own set of principles as well as the sense that his legacy was being unwound and, along the way, it all grew rather personal and nasty.

"It took a toll on him, physically and politically. People want to see him as a father figure and statesman.

"He's said what he wanted to say and people appreciate it for all its worth. It's time to let Pak Lah get on with the work.

"Pak Lah has his own distinctive style and ideas. He may not explain

economic issues as well as Dr Mahathir but people want to see problems sorted out without more meddling and attacks.

"It's got to be resolved according to Pak Lah's way," said the former ministerial aide.

It also cannot be denied that when Dr Mahathir began his attacks, there were some genuine grouses about the administration.

Said one political insider: "Being appointed by Dr Mahathir gave Pak Lah a huge legitimacy, then he won