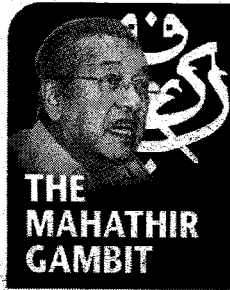


DATE: 20/05/2008

Can he gain the momentum?

NSP - 20/5/2008.

■ **Comment by
Zubaidah Abu Bakar**



WAS it political brinkmanship? Or could it be a mis-step for Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, whose repeated calls for Umno members to quit have backfired, forcing him to announce that he himself was leaving the party he once led for 22 years?

These were some of the questions raised in Umno circles when the former prime minister — whose party membership number 00001 tells the whole story — dropped the bombshell at a forum on “The Position of Malays post-12th General Election” in Alor Star yesterday.

There were shouts of support when Dr Mahathir said he would return to the party following a leadership change. He said Umno was no longer the same party that was formed 62 years ago to fight for Malay interests, rights and

privileges.

“But now it has become a party merely to support Abdullah’s leadership, serve his, his family’s and his cronies’ interests,” he alleged again.

During his term as prime minister, Dr Mahathir had also been accused many times of nepotism and cronyism but he denied it. Many in the Alor Star audience were dumbfounded by his announcement, asking each other whether they had heard him right.

The 82-year-old former party president has been wag-

ing a war of words against his hand-picked successor Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi for more than two years, but had given no indication that he would quit the party.

Why now?

“Why did he do that? Now, we do not have a platform to fight for Umno’s survival,” said a former divisional delegate to the party general assembly who is now an ordinary member of the Kubang Pasu division, which Dr Mahathir once led.

Does this mean that his staunch supporters would follow in his footsteps en masse and cause irreparable cracks in Umno?

At least one, Tan Sri Sanusi Junid, the former Umno secretary-general during whose term in office Umno was declared an unlawful party by the courts, said immediately that he was following “his boss”.

Associate Professor Mo-

hammad Agus Yusoff of Universiti Malaya did not rule out that more members would quit the party and said this may further weaken Umno.

But there are those who believe Dr Mahathir’s resignation is the former prime minister’s latest strategy in forcing Abdullah to step down.

There is also the view that his move was to deflect attention from the Lingam video clip issue, in which he was implicated. But Dr Mahathir denies this.

Whatever his reasons, his timing comes at a critical point for Umno following the Barisan Nasional’s dismal performance in the March general election where some party members had asked for Abdullah’s resignation.

Dr Mahathir has been churning the ground to get party members to rebel against Abdullah’s leadership.

But he has been frustrated that his calls to push Abdullah

to resign have not snowballed the way that he had wanted, said a divisional leader in the crowd.

“So, he is now asking party members in Kedah to quit by trying to convince them that those in other states would also be doing so; just to try and build momentum.

“But it backfired when someone from the floor challenged him to fulfil what he preached by leading the way and quitting,” the divisional leader said.

However, Dr Mahathir will face a problem in getting followers.

Professor Mohamed Mustaffa Ishak of Universiti Utara Malaysia believed members eyeing for posts at the division level would only follow in Dr Mahathir’s footsteps if they failed in their bids.

Dr Mahathir is not any ordinary member and he does enjoy considerable support, having led the party for 22 years.

Certainly his resignation will have an impact on Umno — negative or otherwise.

The next few days will be crucial. If the momentum does not build up, it will end up as a vain attempt by Dr Mahathir, who has never had a good relationship with any of his deputies when he was prime minister or with any of his predecessors such as Tunku Abdul Rahman and Tun Hussein Onn, to control the party in retirement.

If there is momentum, the highly-charged political atmosphere after the March 8 general election will go up another notch.

But the sad fact for Umno is that the call for its members to quit will benefit only opposition political parties and Dr Mahathir may, knowingly or otherwise, be playing into the hands of Umno’s rivals at a time when its leaders are making efforts to revive and rebuild.