

Mesmerised by Mahathir magic

The Umno ground is restless and in the absence of a strong rallying force from within the party, more party members may be drawn to Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's call for reform. *The Star - 6/4/2008*



INSIGHT
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TUN Dr Mahathir Mohamad has probably been keeping a more hectic schedule than some of the new Cabinet ministers. On Saturday evening, he was at the Perkim AGM in Kuala Lumpur where he was welcomed like an old friend.

He is the Perkim president and although he was probably the most senior of the senior citizens that evening, he looked younger than most of them when he flashed his famously quizzical grin.

The next day, he was in Penang for the Tanjong Malay Association AGM. Association president Fadzil Shuib had invited him last year for a function but Dr Mahathir had fallen ill and had to undergo heart surgery.

"Now that he has recovered, we simply had to have him as our VIP guest," said Fadzil. "He has always been my idol; he changed this country and he did a lot for the Malays."

On Tuesday, Dr Mahathir was at a forum in Petaling Jaya organised by the group that runs *mykmu.net*, a website devoted to the former premier and his viewpoints.

He looked handsome and debonair in a crisp Nehru suit and with his mind still as sharp as his tongue it was easy for people to overlook the fact that he will be 84 in July.

But his energy level is not what it used to be and he gets tired if he has to attend more than two functions a day.

He went up to Kedah on only three occasions to campaign for his son Datuk Seri Mukhriz Mahathir in Jerlun during the recent elections. The third time was to vote in his old constituency, Kubang Pasu.

He is, however, planning to return to one of his passions, horse riding, in two months' time.

Going by his activities in the past few weeks, his commitment to his other passion, politics, has not diminished either.

He may not be able to go three places in a day but he has no difficulty staying on his feet for up to two hours talking about political issues. And that was what he did at the Petaling Jaya forum where he was key speaker.

He received a standing ovation even before he spoke, and another when he finished speaking. But as one of those present pointed out, he was the star from the moment he stepped into the hall where he was greeted by wild applause and cries of "Hidup Tun!"

His speech was basically what he had been saying in varying forms since the devastating election results: Umno is in danger; the party has to take corrective action and the Prime Minister take responsibility for the election losses.

But the most interesting aspect of the forum was the number of Umno people in the audience as well as those who shared the stage with him. Apart from Mukhriz, the other



Media magnet: Always the newsmaker, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad has been pushing the dial a little further each time he spoke.



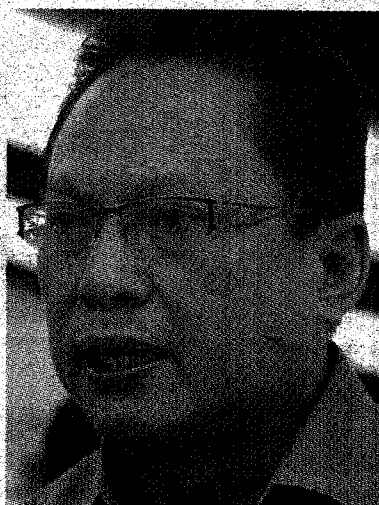
Ezan: 'Umno Youth members want to hear it from the horse's mouth'

speakers were former Selangor Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Dr Khir Toyo and Johor Umno information chief Datuk Dr Puad Zarkashi.

Dr Puad, the Batu Pahat MP, was quite blunt in voicing his concerns about weaknesses in Umno and issues facing the party.

Dr Khir was probably there to show he was not in denial about the new political reality and that he is prepared to face a hostile crowd. But he was badly heckled especially when he told those who accused him of corruption to check his bank account.

Up to a month ago, Umno officials would have thought twice



Dr Puad: Part of the Johor group taking the lead on post-election issues.

about appearing on the same stage as Dr Mahathir but, as they say, we are living in interesting times.

Said PJ Utara Umno Youth deputy chief Mohd Ezan Taib: "I am a loyal Umno man but I wanted to hear it from the horse's mouth. People are talking about a change in leadership but what we need is to reform the party and restore confidence among supporters."

Another Umno Youth politician said: "We are looking for different viewpoints. Some younger people in the party feel they cannot speak their mind; that the old voices in Umno are still in denial and not giving us a realistic picture."

It was a mixed crowd but the true-blue Umno segment of the crowd was clear in their stand on Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

When a member of the audience asked about allowing Anwar to rejoin Umno, there were howls of protest and the muffins that the organisers had provided for breakfast went flying through the air.

It is one of those supreme ironies that although Dr Mahathir and Anwar are at loggerheads, they share the common aim of going against Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. But as some have pointed out, Dr Mahathir is one of the few persons in Umno today with the clout to take on Anwar.

The Umno ground is as confused and restless as ever three weeks after the general election and some feel the Umno leadership is not providing sufficient answers and direction.

"Everything is still uncertain," said an aide to a minister.

The outcome of the Terengganu Menteri Besar issue and East Malaysian protests over the Cabinet posts did not boost morale among Umno members.

Some imagine a "Johor factor" at play because of the way Johor Umno figures have voiced views reflecting that of the party grassroots. For instance, when Umno secretary-general Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib claimed that most state leaders wanted to postpone the Umno elec-

tions, the Johor voices argued that the ground, already simmering, would boil over if the polls were put off.

Umno leaders from Johor have always been different from those in other states. They see themselves as opinion-shapers and often take the lead on issues affecting the party and Malays. They were among the earliest to come to terms with the March 8 political tsunami.

The Johor group feels that the old ways of top-down decision making must give way to a more sensitive handling of the ground.

Vice-president Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin has emerged as a clear voice of reason and he will continue to set the tone in the months to come.

Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak is very aware of how the ground has moved but as the loyal No.2 he has to exercise reticence in both word and deed.

In the meantime, Dr Mahathir seems to have picked up from where he left off before he was hospitalised last year. In the absence of a strong rallying force within Umno to harness all this restless energy, Umno members cannot be blamed if they gravitate towards Dr Mahathir's radical voice of reform.

It is amazing that although just an ordinary Umno member, he has been able to set the pace and even dictate certain issues in the party. For example, his proposal to abolish the requisite nominations needed to contest party posts had Umno leaders scrambling to respond and take a stand.

He does not believe in being defensive. For him, attack is the best form of defence. Each time he speaks, the Machiavellian in him pushes the dial a bit further. Fed up that Najib was not responding to his challenge, he has since thrown in Muhyiddin's name as another potential candidate for the top post.

Some Umno politicians think the media is giving too much space to Dr Mahathir. He can be contradictory at times but the point is he knows how the media work, he thrives on controversy, and, even if one does not always agree with him, he talks sense.

He has always been a newsmaker — for the things he says and the way he says it. More significantly, there are people out there who want to hear what he has to say.

Said Mohd Ezan: "Please don't misconstrue our presence at the forum. We are not trying to create a movement. Tun Mahathir is like our *sifu*. He had his ups and downs; he made good decisions and bad ones. But he loves Umno; he understands what is happening on the ground and that's why we are interested in what he has to say."

But, said Kedah politician Datuk Rozai Shafian, Umno has its own way of doing things.

"Pak Lah has said he is not stepping down and Umno is unlikely to force him to do so. We will support him," said Rozai.

Still, testing days lie ahead for the ruling party and the political temperature will rise further when the party's branches and divisions hold their meetings starting July. What more with Dr Mahathir hovering in the background.