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| Newspaper | The Star   |
| Date      | 27/11/2011 |

# Dr M's prescription for Umno

Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad has been trying to shake things up a little in the run-up to the Umno general assembly which he hopes will set the agenda for a big win in the upcoming general election.

**T**UN Dr Mahathir Mohamad's office at Yayasan Albukhary is like one of those penthouse floors but in a minimalist and masculine kind of way. It is sparsely furnished, with lots of wood paneling and floor-to-ceiling glass windows on three sides and has a 3D view of the city.

It is one of his three offices and the space is big enough for a ballroom dancing contest. But the former Premier was more preoccupied that particular afternoon about the mock trial against two famous "war criminals" namely Tony Blair and George W. Bush that had been going on the last few days on the second floor of the building. The verdict was due in about an hour's time and the interview was, well, to fill the time in between.

Dr Mahathir had been so engrossed making notes on a notepad that he did not notice that a half-eaten piece of nut candy - he snacks on them when his sugar level dips - was being finished off by a line of ants. His handwriting is a graceful cursive and he must be the only man in the building still using a fountain pen.

The room was rather warm and stuffy but he seemed to prefer it that way and looked as cool as a cucumber in a business suit, striped shirt and grey tie. He looked remarkable for an 86-year-old. He moves a little slower these days but that has not stopped him from having a packed schedule.

He was in Myanmar recently where he met the president Thein Sein and democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi who impressed him.

It is rare to hear him say he likes someone, but he admitted: "I like her. She is nice and friendly."

When teased about having a weakness for "iron ladies", he said, "You mean (Margaret) Thatcher?"

Caught him there. Actually, I was thinking of Tan Sri Rafidah Aziz whom he had liked for her fighting spirit.

But the lady in his life remains Tun Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali. She came in towards the end of the interview, walking quietly towards the prayer room, as though trying not to be noticed.

The two Tuns have this subtle comfort level between them and he said in a teasing voice, "don't interview her". When she looked up, he made a funny face and she sort of rolled her eyes, smiled and walked on.

Dr Mahathir was due to fly off to India on the morning of the Umno general assembly but has delayed the trip so that he could be at the opening where he is assured of the best seat in the house with a Persian carpet laid out for his VVIP feet. He has been at every single opening and closing of the party assembly since Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak took over the party. He is flying home from India to make it for the winding-up by Najib on the last day.

But Blair, Bush and war crimes aside, it is the state of Umno that is constantly at the back of Dr Mahathir's mind.

Dr Mahathir is famous for saying it like it is but he is also an expert at throwing curve balls that have



Umno on his mind: Dr Mahathir wants Najib to win and to ensure the survival of Umno.

people wondering what he is aiming at. And he is a master of political timing. His remarks about Umno the last couple of weeks have been a talking point among the Umno circle.

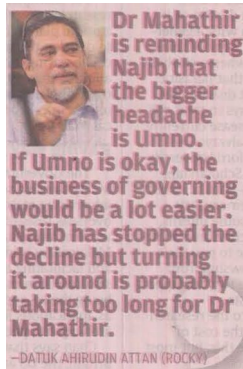
The remarks were made with an eye on next week's Umno general assembly. This assembly will set the agenda for the general election and what many in the party see as the mother of all battles.

Dr Mahathir, more than anyone else, knows that the next general election will determine the survival of Umno. He is shrewd, intelligent and strategic, traits that made him such a dangerous man to his opponents. Part of Dr Mahathir's longevity has been his talent for reading the ground and his reading is, to quote him, "not good".

## Main issues

There are several issues which he is extremely concerned about in the run-up to the election and which he thinks ought to be settled at the Umno assembly.

One is the issue of winnable candidates. Although everyone in the party has been singing the winnable candidate tune, he knows there is resistance on the ground especially among many division



warlords who think they are winnable even though they are not. He knows very few will make way willingly and that there will be sabotage.

"It can be done provided you lay the ground. You have to meet them, explain why it has to be a certain candidate. So far, I don't see it (the groundwork)," he said.

He is expecting the Umno lead-



ership to identify the problematic warlords, call them in and personally tell them about what is needed to win well.

It is in this context that he believes that if the general election is held now, the Barisan Nasional would not do well.

"But if Umno goes to the ground to explain the danger of undermining candidates, the picture will change. Certain Umno leaders and incumbent MPs and assemblymen must accept that they should not contest. They should make it clear now," he said.

He is urging Umno members not to be afraid to criticise and tell party leaders, especially at the division and branch levels, that they have to correct themselves.

"When you don't criticise within the party and the party goes on doing the wrong thing, the party will fail. When supporters outside the party see that Umno is not making corrections, they will reject the party. They say it is painful for them to vote for the opposition but they do it, otherwise Umno will not realise it is on the wrong path," he said.

He is telling Umno not to be complacent, given the feedback that the Malay vote has returned.

As one Umno official pointed out, he is provoking Umno in his usual diabolical style to "prove to us that you have changed." There has been no real test to show that Umno has really changed. The warlords are still there, their attitudes are still the same.

"You need internally generated criticism in the party. If you don't criticise from inside, people from outside will do it and those inside will go out to criticise. That's why you have Perkasas, formed mostly by those unhappy within the party and (who have) moved out to voice their views. Those who left with me have still not been re-admitted," said Dr Mahathir.

This ties in with another of his concerns - Umno has moved too fast and too far to the middle ground.

Umno's strength has always been a result of two groups. The first include the right-wingers and nationalists who hold fast to their belief in Malay rights. The hardcore among them feel disenfranchised and have drifted off into Perkasas. They feel that Najib has not done enough for the Malays and done too much for the non-Malays.

The second group comprises those who understand that concessions have to be made and they are more about the party and less about being Malay.

Dr Mahathir understands that in order for Umno to win convincingly, it has to get both groups back on the same page.

It would strengthen Najib's position in Umno but his dilemma is how to absorb Perkasas without adopting the same ultra-Malay stance. His challenge is about strik-

ing the balance between the old and the new politics.

"Dr Mahathir is trying to inject a sense of urgency in Umno. He is reminding Najib that the bigger headache is Umno. If Umno is okay, the business of governing would be a lot easier. Najib has stopped the decline but turning it around is probably taking too long for Dr Mahathir," said Datuk "Rocky" Ahirudin Attan, a former newspaper editor and political blogger.

One thing that Dr Mahathir makes no bones about is his adversity towards Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. He has yet to forgive his successor and holds him responsible for what he calls "the destruction" of Umno and the Barisan.

The antagonism between them extends to the level of Abdullah's son-in-law Khairy Jamaluddin and Dr Mahathir's son Datuk Mukhriz Mahathir who reportedly cannot stand the sight of each other. No one can see any closure to this unfortunate affair, and it does say a lot for Najib's diplomatic skills in maintaining ties with his two former bosses.

The Pakatan Rakyat side has been going on about how Dr Mahathir wants to replace Najib with Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin. The story makes good copy but does not make sense.

## Most deputies

Dr Mahathir, said one senior journalist, holds the record for having the most deputy prime ministers and also for having pushed out one prime minister or maybe two, if you count Tunku Abdul Rahman.

"I don't think he wants to set a record for changing PMs," said the journalist.

The elder statesman's prime concern is that Umno survives beyond the next election. Like everyone else in Umno, he wants the party to recover its lost ground and he is banking on Najib to lead the Barisan to victory.

If Najib accomplishes that, he is going to be one of the most powerful presidents Umno has ever had. But if he fails, the move to topple him will begin. Until then, Umno is with Najib.

Said Dr Mahathir: "I want Najib to win. He should win together with the party. As the PM, he has done fairly well, he has introduced new ideas but he must also see the whole picture. He thinks the Chinese are not going to give their support but he forgets that his constituents are the Malays."

"I would say I support him. I don't expect leaders to be perfect, I was not perfect, that was why so many people challenged me. Yes, he is juggling too many balls; maybe he should concentrate on a few."

Basically, Dr Mahathir sees Umno as a super bus with lots of people on board and he acknowledges that Najib is the best man to take the wheel. Dr Mahathir is just one of the passengers. He is not exactly a backseat driver as some people believe, but he is definitely a passenger with clear opinions about the journey ahead.

His greatest wish is that the next general election should not be Umno's last ride in the driver's seat.