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Najib 'saves' Dr M in divisive party elections

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privatisation of government enterprises. Under his leadership, the national carrier, utilities and telecommunication firms were privatised.

He also oversaw the formation of Proton, which eventually became the largest car maker in Southeast Asia by the end of the 1980s.

Things, however, changed in the 1987 Umno elections. It saw the emergence of two camps — Team A and Team B — one belonging to Dr Mahathir and the other to Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah (Ku Li) respectively.

The rivalry was a result of Ku Li challenging Dr Mahathir for the party leadership.

With a slim 41-vote majority, Dr Mahathir won the party election and subsequently removed all Team B members from the cabinet.

This saw Team B leaders claiming that many party delegates were improperly elected, and they eventually filed a suit to revoke the outcome of the party polls.

This saw the party being declared illegal on technical grounds in 1988.

Dr Mahathir immediately reconstituted Umno, with only Team A members as "Umno Baru".

Makbul said Dr Mahathir's guile and ferocity had helped him emerge

from the wilderness during Tunku Abdul Rahman's premiership to becoming the longest-serving prime minister.

However he also attributed much of the instability within Umno to Dr Mahathir's pragmatic and ruthless ways.

"During his reign, Dr Mahathir's ways had, more often than not, contradicted Malay mannerisms and values.

"This went against Hussein's softer approach, which was a continuation of Razak's legacy."

Being an irrefutably intelligent leader and impressive orator, Makbul said Dr Mahathir managed to influence and gain trust from the majority of Umno leaders.

It was also undeniable, he added, that Dr Mahathir ruled with an iron fist and this caused a major friction within Umno.

Makbul added that the infamous Team A and Team B debacle almost saw Dr Mahathir's downfall but he was "saved" by Datuk Seri Najib Razak's u-turn decision to back him a day before Umno held their polls to choose a new leader.

TOMORROW: The end of Tun Dr Mahathir's premiership, and Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and Datuk Seri Najib Razak's leadership