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Gloves are off in Dr M's tirade

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The ties between Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak seems to have reached a point of no return with his latest attack.

TUN Dr Mahathir Mohamad returned from Japan on Wednesday. He was there for about two weeks where he is said to have undergone a cataract procedure.

Of course, many people thought he went off so that he would have a good excuse for skipping the two "weddings of the year" - the nuptials of the daughters of the country's top two leaders.

He came home with better vision and resumed his attacks against Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak the next day.

But what he had to say this time shocked many to the core - he had joined the opposition chorus on the Altantuya murder issue.

He expressed sympathy for one of the murderers Sirul Azhar, who used to be part of his security team, and he wondered who he had taken orders from. It was a loaded comment and even those close to him were stunned that his mission against Najib has come to this.

His latest action has been described as "the gloves are off" "the claws are out" and even "hitting below the belt".

It has become very personal. But the cynics are not surprised because Dr Mahathir has quite a track record - he went through four deputy prime ministers, got rid of one prime minister and is now hell-bent on toppling another prime minister. The Umno rank-and-file are paralysed with confusion and concern about where it will lead to.

Dr Mahathir's opposition to Najib's leadership has had limited effect on the average Malaysian and even less impact on Umno.

The IMDB issue is too complicated for the average person to get excited about and besides, not many people believe it when he says it will bankrupt the country. There have been bigger financial scandals and bailouts during Dr Mahathir's time and Malaysia is still around.

Dr Mahathir is a sawy and sophisticated thinker. He would have followed the Mongolian's murder trial, he has seen how exhaustive it was and that there has been due process. He is fully aware that Najib has twice invoked the name of Allah to deny he was ever connected to the murdered woman. One of those occasions took place inside a mosque.

The fact that Dr Mahathir has chosen to join the opposition in exploiting the Altantuya issue shows that he is switching strategy by going for an issue that is more gossipy and sensational and which has a wider audience base.

"He is throwing everything in, including the kitchen sink," said an Umno insider.

The more informed in Umno agree that Najib has to be more forthcoming about the IMDB issue but Dr Mahathir's claim that Barisan Nasional will lose the next general election if Najib does not step down simply does not cut any ice with them.

It is a rather disingenuous argument that conveniently ignores the strengths and weaknesses of the two rival coalitions.

"The IMDB issue, the new government jet, they are real issues. But to add them up and conclude that we will lose the general election, I don't get that. Ask any politician or analyst in the market - if Najib were to call for a general

Joceline Tan
Analysis



election today, who will win?" said the Umno insider.

At the start of Dr Mahathir's attacks, Umno politicians had thought that he was being his usual controlling self. They know he has a certain world view on how to do things and they know it is not easy for him to let go after 22 years as the most powerful man in the country.

Many in Umno, Najib included, have often felt that Dr Mahathir was entitled to a little residual influence after retiring.

But the IMDB issue aside, they have also suspected an element of pure politics in Dr Mahathir's systematic attacks and they think it has to do with the political future of his son Datuk Seri Mukhriz Mahathir.

The Kedah Menteri Besar suffered a major setback when he lost the vice-president contest in the Umno election. Umno politicians said that when Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi resigned, Mukhriz benefitted and if Najib were to go, it will open the way for Mukhriz to move up.

Najib's elegant silence, so to speak, has to end. Dr Mahathir is slowly chipping at his reputation, bit by bit, and keeping quiet is not going to help.

Najib likes to chew over issues before replying or taking a stand and that causes uncertainty down the line.

The lieutenants in the party want to defend him but they say they need him to take the lead so that they can take his message to the ground.

For instance, they cannot answer when people ask how Najib's stepson made his money. In a modern democracy, politicians have to be able to account for what goes on in their private life.

He probably wants to respond on his own terms and in his own time. But he needs to address the issues raised in a transparent manner and explain what is being done to rectify the situation.

The relationship between the two men seems beyond repair. The last time they were seen together was at the LeTour de Langkawi. They kept up a civil appearance but the body language was beyond awkward.

Dr Mahathir is a master strategist and there will probably be more stunning opinions and accusation in the days ahead.

He is still testing the waters, looking for the right buttons to press to get Umno people to make the move and to capture public interest and support.

The Umno fraternity hopes that he will not go so far as to join forces with the opposition because it would be ironic to find him on the same page as his nemesis, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

They still respect him but if that should happen, Dr Mahathir, rather than Najib, will be perceived as the one causing Umno's downfall.