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# Former enemies now frenemies

Former Deputy Prime Minister Tun Musa Hitam found himself in the crosshairs of the ire of the combative Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

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DAP's newsmaker and parliamentarian Jeff Ooi marked the 29th anniversary of the notorious Operation Lalang on his Facebook. "Ops Lalang ... 29 years today. A lingering Umno legacy," he wrote. A year ago, Ooi, who is Jelutong MP, would have probably blamed the Internal Security Act (ISA) crackdown on Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad who was then the Prime Minister and Home Minister.

But Malaysian politics has become so fluid - enemies yesterday, friends today and something else tomorrow.

Dr Mahathir has gone from arch enemy to friend of DAP. Leaders of DAP have taken to closing an eye on his past excesses and some of them even pretend that they never said all those awful things about him.

All the things they used to throw at Dr Mahathir have been conveniently transferred to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak.

The former Premier has also been interviewed by *Rocketkini*, the DAP's Bahasa Malaysia online portal. That ought to have been another milestone in his colourful and controversial career but it passed with quite little interest largely because what he told *Rocketkini* was what he had said numerous times before.

Batu Kawan MP Kasthuri Patto, whose politician father P. Patto was also caught in the ISA dragnet, issued a statement censuring Barisan Nasional for using the ISA to cling to power. She lauded those arrested, among whom was Lim Kit Siang, as the "conscience of the many voiceless".

Again, no mention of Dr Mahathir. It does look like the opposition parties have absolved Dr Mahathir of any responsibility for Operation Lalang.

Past anniversaries of Operation Lalang used to find Lim demanding that Dr Mahathir apologise for his action but there was silence on the part of the elderly DAP leader this year.

There is actually a deep sense of disquiet among many DAP politicians about Dr Mahathir. They are still distrustful of what they call the "old man's agenda". Their aim is to ride on his prestige but they are unsure whether this avid horseman is instead riding them like a horse.

But Lim's word carries weight in the party. He has insisted that DAP needs to work with Dr Mahathir to break into the Malay hinterland and erode the influence of Umno.

Lim and Dr Mahathir are like some sort of secret lovers these days. They are together in their quest against Najib but they try not to be seen together because Lim turns off the average Malay while the average Chinese is not into Dr Mahathir.

Lim even chastised Najib for remarks seen as aimed at Dr Mahathir during the Budget speech. He said Najib was "hitting below the belt" for "deviously attacking Mahathir".

Well, Lim did have a point there



**Turning yellow:** Dr Mahathir confirmed he will join the Bersih rally in November. He is seen here after a *ceramah* in Shah Alam with (from left) Shah Alam MP Khalid Samad, Amanah president Mohamad Sabu and Salor assemblyman Datuk Husam Musa.



**Faizal:** Mahathir-DAP alliance a turn-off for Umno members.



**Kasthuri:** No censoring of Dr Mahathir over Operation Lalang.



**Musa:** His private letters became the stuff of public consumption.

because Najib had concluded his Budget speech with a sort of farewell to Mahathirism and the unfilled Vision 2020. The Prime Minister announced his own vision for Malaysia, naming it TN50 or Tranformasi Nasional which will chart the future for a new Malaysian generation by the year 2050.

"Let the old legacy pass. We will create the future of Malaysia," said Najib, without once mentioning Vision 2020.

To rub salt into the wound, Najib appointed the happening Youth and Sports Minister Khairy Jamaluddin to initiate the discourse for TN50.

It was quite a Machiavellian touch on Najib's part.

Khairy is the perfect choice for the task but, as everyone knows, Dr Mahathir dislikes Khairy whom he privately mocked as "*kambing hitam*" (black sheep) from the day the latter's father-in-law Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi became Prime Minister. Moreover, Khairy had stood in the way of Datuk Seri Mukhriz Mahathir's political ambitions in Umno.

In his interview with *Rocketkini*, Dr Mahathir dismissed Najib as a "failed student". He was not amused with the opinion that Najib is his "best student" in the art of

political survival.

But there is no denying that the student has elevated the art of the master.

Dr Mahathir has yet to respond to the Budget or TN50. Instead, he decided to give Najib a break and turned his guns on Tun Musa Hitam, his Deputy Prime Minister from 1981 to 1986.

He had read Musa's memoirs *Frankly Speaking* and decided to do some frank speaking of his own.

He apparently could not stomach Musa's claim that he resigned as Deputy Prime Minister after being accused of trying to oust Dr Mahathir.

Dr Mahathir published two confidential letters sent to him from Musa in his Chedet blog to show that Musa resigned because he was upset over Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah being made Trade and Industry Minister.

Dr Mahathir and Musa rode to victory in the 1981 general election as the 2Ms but their relationship swiftly went downhill, largely because of their different personalities and outlook and also because where Dr Mahathir is concerned, there can only be one tiger on the hill.

In 1984, Musa became the Umno deputy president against his rival Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah.

In what was seen as a move to check the rise of Musa, Dr Mahathir offered Tengku Razaleigh the post of Trade and Industry Minister.

Musa was naturally unhappy and had penned the two letters to Dr Mahathir. The first letter was an attempt to dissuade Dr Mahathir from offering the Trade and Industry post to Tengku Razaleigh and Musa had ended the letter with an implied threat to resign.

Of course, the appointment went through and Musa sent the second letter, hand-written for greater confidentiality, to inform Dr Mahathir that he intended to resign as Deputy Prime Minister.

It played right into Dr Mahathir's own long-term survival plans.

In hindsight, Musa was such a political naive - he had beaten Tengku Razaleigh for the Umno No.2 post by a credible margin, he was the Deputy Prime Minister and he was resigning because his rival was back in the Cabinet. That was so weird, to say the least. Musa became the first of four deputies under Dr Mahathir. They were like bridesmaids of whom only one eventually reached the altar only to be pushed down the steps all too soon.

The above episode shows that there is no such thing as private letters in politics.

Secondly, it shows that Dr Mahathir has the memory of an elephant. All those instances when he claimed he could not remember are probably memory lapses of convenience.

Thirdly, it seemed like Musa had forgotten about the incriminating letters or perhaps he was also suffering a spell of selective recall.

And finally, Dr Mahathir is such a combative man. It was obvious that he was trying to take the micky out of Musa but was it really necessary to embarrass Musa this way after all these years?

Anyway, Musa was also guilty of contradictory behaviour. Despite complaining about Tengku Razaleigh, he ganged up with the Kelantan Prince three years later to take on Dr Mahathir and Tun Ghafar Baba in an epic fight for the leadership of Umno.

Dr Mahathir won narrowly by 43 votes, leading Tengku Razaleigh to scorn him as the "one-busload president". Those in the Mahathir circle say he has never forgiven Tengku Razaleigh for challenging him.

Ghafar has passed on. Musa is 82 and, in his own words, in his twilight years. Tengku Razaleigh, 79, has talked about calling it a day.

But Dr Mahathir at 91 is still going strong, picking fights with politicians past and present and still trying to determine who should be the next Prime Minister.

Top photo-journalist Minag Jingo who has been on the Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia *ceramah* trail has been constantly amazed that Dr Mahathir has been able to keep the pace, travelling from state to state to address the rural Malay crowd.

At a recent *ceramah* in Shah Alam, Dr Mahathir announced he would be attending the Bersih rally in November. He also defended the rally against critics, slamming Datuk Jamal Yunus, the leader of the Baju Merah group, as "Jamal Jamban".

The mostly pro-opposition crowd loved it but Datuk Wan Albakri Mohd Nor, a one-time Mahathir admirer, walked out midway through Dr Mahathir's speech.

"I thought he would talk about big issues but he was condemning the Election Commission for the redelimitation exercise. What's wrong with this man? In his time, he did the same thing," said Wan Albakri.

Dr Mahathir has made a complete U-turn in his views on issues, people and politics - all thanks to his hatred for Najib.

According to Kapar Umno division chief Datuk Faizal Abdullah, the biggest turn-off for many in Umno is the new alliance between Dr Mahathir and DAP.

"They cannot accept Dr Mahathir holding hands with Lim Kit Siang and DAP. Throughout his career, he told us how destructive and racist DAP was. He used to talk about DAP as though it was '*haram*' (forbidden), we should not even touch or go near them. And now everything is okay for him," said Faizal.

That's politics, as they say.