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Political fatigue sets in

joceline@thestar.com.my

Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's greatest obstacle may not be the Prime Minister. Instead, it is an electorate that is politically pooped from too much politics.

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It has been a whirlwind week for Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

He has made a clean break with Umno and also with the government that he was once a part of. He has resigned from all his government-linked posts - Proton Holdings, Universiti Teknologi Petronas, Langkawi Development Authority and Tioman Island Development Authority.

Letting go of Proton must have been the hardest. That was his most precious baby but it was a baby that could not grow up to walk and run on its own.

But sharing the same stage as the Pakatan Harapan leaders seems to have lifted the spirits of Malaysia's most famous 90-year-old and given his campaign against the Prime Minister a boost.

He made his maiden appearance at an opposition ceramah on Monday night in the Pandan parliamentary area held by PKR vice-president Rafizi Ramli.

Dr Mahathir and Tun Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali looked rather self-conscious when they arrived at the venue at about 10.30pm.

The Pakatan Harapan way of doing things is still new to this couple who have led a gilded life during all those years in power - limousines, private jets, special treatment and always someone there to do things for them.

Opposition politics is less weighed down by protocol, it is more informal and it will take some adjusting to for the elderly couple.

The two Tuns looked rather over-dressed amid the casually-attired ceramah speakers from Pakatan Harapan. Dr Mahathir stood out in his vibrant purple shirt while Dr Siti Hasmah wore a maroon baju kurung and pearls around her neck.

Dr Mahathir was accorded the sort of star treatment usually reserved for Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

He was personally greeted and led to the stage by DAP's Lim Kit Siang, the man whom he had once labelled the country's "No 1 racist".

Lim, on his part, has called Dr Mahathir equally awful names but all that is behind them. They are now allies in their crusade against Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak.

Dr Mahathir is a cerebral rather than a showman type of politician. His speech was rather meandering and nothing like the fiery and punching style of the opposition politicians.

This is the first time that many of the younger set in Pakatan Harapan are seeing him up close and they are amazed that, at age 90, he can still do what he is doing.

A day earlier, at the Citizens' Congress event in Shah Alam, he sat from 2pm to 6pm listening to speeches after which he fielded questions from the media, his eyes sparkling and flashing his photogenic smile.

His mind is still crystal clear even if he is prone to "selective



New platform: Dr Mahathir took centrestage in his first opposition ceramah which drew a crowd of about 500 people on Monday night.



Dr Thor: 'My friends say it is better to take care of work and business'.



Sim: People talk about not coming out to vote in the next general election



Rafizi: Questioned the RM100mil scandal in the Youth and Sports Ministry.

memory loss" and has a tendency to interpret history as he sees fit.

Monday night's ceramah was the start of a country-wide speaking tour in connection with the anti-Najib campaign and it featured top speakers from Pakatan Harapan. But somehow the audience was not commensurate with the star-studded cast.

A pro-Pakatan Harapan news portal reported a crowd of about 400, *The Star's* estimate was 500 while the organisers said there were 1,000 people.

Thinning crowds and lukewarm audiences at political events have been the trend for sometime now.

"Political fatigue has crept in for sure. Right now, people want to take care of their business and pursue their three square meals a day," said a second-term Pakatan Harapan MP.

The mood during the above MP's first term and now has been a world apart. His sense is that the public are tired out by the endless politicking, they have become disinterested, fed-up and there is even some disillusionment.

Political fatigue symptoms are often visible in the form of swelling anger, watery expectations, nagging insecurity and a sense of hopelessness.

"At one time, everything on my

friends' Facebook was about politics. Now, I see pictures of food they ate, nice scenery of places, pictures of their children. There is less and less politics," said Dr Thor Teong Ghee, a Gerakan politician from Penang.

Dr Thor, a medical doctor, joked that some of his friends are recovering after overdosing on politics.

There are various reasons for the creeping political fatigue.

One is a deep disappointment especially among the urban middle-class. Politicians who came in promising new politics have been playing politics like the veterans while those from the old politics era have not lived up to their promise to change for the better.

Eight years down the road, so much has changed and so little has changed as well.

"GE13 was the ultimate high for them. The downhill spiral began with the Kajang Move, then the Pakatan Rakyat breakup," said Rita Sim of the CENSE think-tank.

The IMDB controversy added to the sinking feeling. On the Pakatan Harapan side, the political storm blowing over the Penang Chief Minister's bungalow has yet to subside.

The recent RM100mil corruption scandal in the Youth and Sports Ministry also did not help. It has been a big joke on the ceramah circuit.

PKR's Rafizi drew laughter when he said: "Pak Lah had a sleep disorder. It looks like his son-in-law has the same problem. How can RM100mil disappear like that? The Minister must have been sleeping."

The then Pakatan Rakyat did well in GE13 because of the trust level they enjoyed among urban Malaysia. But the trust level has dipped and the opposition alliance is actually in danger of losing ground.

A common refrain among some urbanites is that they plan to go on holiday the next general election.

"Some of them have lost hope, they say they are not coming out to vote," said Sim.

The business community feels equally let down. The concern of this group, said the above MP, is economic performance. The captains of industry feel that politicians spend too much time running each other down instead of running the country.

They are tired of the political rhetoric, the posturing and the one-upmanship. They think that political leaders should spend less time quarrelling and put their energy into attracting investments, putting plans into action and finding ways to help the low income group.

They see the Citizens' Declaration, the campaign seeking Najib's ouster, as yet another showboat effort that will end up distracting the political leadership from their duties.

Dr Mahathir's claim that people are afraid to sign it does not make sense. Malaysians have been anything but fearful since the political tsunami - they have defied the police by taking part in one street protest after another and they are unafraid to speak their

mind whether in the coffeshop or on the Internet.

The urban literati has been neither impressed nor inspired. They are not buying into Dr Mahathir's sales pitch that is to remove Najib first, and then decide what happens after that. Dr Mahathir has been unable or unwilling to provide an answer to who will take over as Prime Minister.

The business and financial sector, in particular, dislikes uncertainty. Their response has been: You are asking us to make a choice without any assurance that we are not jumping from the frying pan into the fire.

They are under great economic stress and they are not keen to venture into more political uncertainty.

Another problem for them is that they think Dr Mahathir is "consumed by personal politics."

But, generally, very few people think the Citizens' Declaration will unseat Najib.

The opposition leaders are aware of that but they are on board because they believe Dr Mahathir, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin and Datuk Seri Mukhriz Mahathir can help swing Malay votes to Pakatan Harapan.

The 3Ms can help erode the Umno ground and make it easier for Pakatan Harapan in states like Johor and Kedah.

The group is eyeing one million signatures after which they plan to submit it to the Conference of Rulers. This will be the first time that a group is petitioning the Conference of Rulers and there is no telling what will happen.

But as everyone knows, Dr Mahathir has had, for want of a better word, a colourful history with the Malay Sultans and not all of them are likely to embrace him like a long-lost friend.

Dr Mahathir has come full circle. At the height of his power, he had clipped the powers of the royals and now, he is coming to them for support.

He had started his fight against Najib by trying to rally support from within Umno. When that did not happen, he tried to frighten them with the prospect of electoral defeat. Then he resorted to calling them as "pemakan dedak", a derogatory Malay term for people who, like livestock animals, follow whoever feeds them.

Next, he quit Umno for the second time in his life and joined forces with the opposition for the first time in his life. He is also suing Najib and it looks like he will be playing a starring role in Pakatan Harapan from now until the next general election.

Many people are utterly tired of politics but Dr Mahathir is not among them.

Nevertheless, he took time off to attend a Richard Clayderman concert. Politics runs in his blood but there is nothing like music to soothe the soul.