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Dr M touches royal nerve

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Not many people knew of Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's prickly ties with the Johor palace but it is now all out in the open following the royal rebuke over the Bangsa Johor issue.

GARDENING, watching football, travelling and writing a book. Those were some of the things that Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak said he might do when it is time to call it a day in politics.

He said he would not spend his time harassing his successor on how to run the country. It was one of those tongue-in-cheek remarks but it was clearly a dig at Malaysia's most famous retiree who is anything but retired.

It was around this time last year that Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad told reporters his birthday wish was for Najib "to enjoy his retirement".

But this is not Disneyland where wishes always come true. Najib is still going strong, so is Dr Mahathir.

The former premier has looked rather fit since his discharge from hospital. He is back to form and commenting on almost everything under the sun. Unfortunately, one of his comments on Bangsa Johor touched a raw nerve or, might we say, a royal nerve.

Dr Mahathir described the Bangsa Johor sentiments, popularised by the Johor Crown Prince for the past couple of years, as a form of parochialism that could lead to the break-up of the Federation. He said it was more important for everyone to see themselves as Malaysians rather than identify with the state they came from.

The royal rebuke came like a thunder bolt and from no less than the Sultan of Johor himself.

Sultan Ibrahim Ibni Almarhum Sultan Iskandar did not hold his punches. He said Dr Mahathir was ignorant of Johor's history, he told the former premier not to stir the hornet's nest and to keep his mouth shut.

"He has quarrelled with many world leaders, including our neighbour Singapore, and put Malaysia in a spot. Now he talks about unity with an incredibly straight face. He is the root cause of the present problems in the country. He has no right to interfere in my state. I will not tolerate his antics," said the Sultan.

It was quite an earful and Syed Saddiq Abdul Rahman, one of the Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia founding members, immediately took to Facebook to state that he disagrees with Dr Mahathir and to explain why he supports the notion of Bangsa Johor.

Syed Saddiq is widely seen as a likely Parti Pribumi candidate in Johor and he will be dead in the water if he does not take a stand, especially given that the Sultan also accused Dr Mahathir of "going around dividing the people, including the Malays".

"Bangsa Johor is not about breaking away from Malaysia. It's about injecting pride, identity and stability among Johor people," said Datuk Nur Jazlan Mohamed, who is Pulai MP and Deputy Home Minister.

There has been silence on the Dr



Royal blasting: The Sultan of Johor, seen here with the Crown Prince, did not appreciate Dr Mahathir's dismissive remarks about the Bangsa Johor concept.



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Datuk Nur Jazlan Mohamed

Mahathir end as well as on the part of Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin. Muhyiddin does not need this on his plate; he has yet to live down his "I am Malay first, Malaysian second" remark.

Johor will be a key state for the opposition and crossing swords with the Sultan is the last thing they need.

Dr Mahathir's comment was basically his personal opinion on the implications of what some have called state nationalism. He has been a national leader, he is worldly and well-read and he is not into this sort of statism.

Those who are part of the Johor loop say that the royal outburst had less to do with what was said about the Bangsa Johor idea than the person who said it.

Dr Mahathir is, apparently, not in the good books of Sultan Ibrahim. For instance, said Johorean and pro-Umno blogger Zakhr Mohamad, Dr Mahathir was not invited to the Sultan's coronation nor to the wedding reception of Crown Prince Tunku Ismail Sultan Ibrahim.

These were two of the most glittering royal events in recent years and the countdown to the coronation was the subject of a documen-

(Tunku Jalil) passed away," said Zakhr.

The Sultan has said in the past that he is neutral on matters of national politics. But that does not mean that what he says does not have an impact on politics and politicians.

The power of the Johor royals, said a public affairs consultant, comes from the fact that they are very rooted in Johor, they live in the state that they rule and they take an interest in everything that goes on in the state.

The Sultan's Kembara expeditions have become something special for Johoreans.

"I went for it in 2012, people put on their best clothes, they had cooking competitions to have the best dishes and it was like Hari Raya. He was regal, there was all that pomp and yet you could see how normal the Sultan is. The excitement and connection are real and they play into the hearts of the people," said the consultant.

It is no secret that many of the Sultans have never quite forgiven Dr Mahathir for the way he treated them and curbed their constitutional powers back in the 1980s.

Dr Mahathir used his Chedet blog a few days ago to tender an apology for that long ago controversy. It was 28 years late but still, how often does Dr Mahathir apologise? He is, after all, famous for never owning up to being wrong.

But there was hardly a ripple of interest. Not many people under 30 years of age knew what he was rambling on about and as for those who had an inkling, it was a case of too little too late.

"Johoreans have always respected Dr Mahathir as someone who changed the country. He is trying to get back into the thick of politics but you don't see many people responding to that," said Nur Jazlan.

For sure, Dr Mahathir remains a news-maker. He makes news for the right and wrong reasons. But of late, the wrong reasons are starting

to eclipse the right ones.

He is a man in a hurry because he does not have much time left. He is frustrated that he has failed to dislodge Najib after a year of relentless attacks.

At the height of his power, he was famous for putting across his opinions in a simple way and it worked. But society has changed, there is a lot of scepticism out there and the Internet means people can compare and choose, accept or reject.

"The generation that used to hold onto his every words is shrinking. They have grown old, died or are just tired. Frankly, if my dad is alive today, he will not agree with what Dr Mahathir is doing," said Nur Jazlan, whose famous father Tan Sri Mohamed Rahmat was a Mahathir loyalist.

But a key reason why Dr Mahathir's campaign against Najib is not going anywhere is because anyone who wants to replace Najib has to be the anti-thesis of the politics that Najib represents.

The public is simply not convinced about Dr Mahathir because he is cut from the same Umno cloth, he has too much baggage and they see him as the driver of what Umno is today. They see the return of Dr Mahathir to active politics as a sign that politics has gone backwards rather than forward.

Disillusionment has set in. People are overwhelmed by too much politicking and underwhelmed by the lack of quality in politics. The dream of a new politics is over and there is disappointment over the gap between expectation and reality.

People are looking for alternative heroes and this is also one of the reasons why personalities like the Johor royals have been able to capture the public's imagination.

Not many people knew of the touchy ties between the Sultan and Dr Mahathir but it is all out in the open now and it could be quite awkward for his new party in Johor.