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Dr M's campaign hurting himself

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Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad is not in a good place at the moment. His crusade to topple the Prime Minister is not getting rave reviews and now he has been axed as Petronas adviser.

UP till Friday, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad had a choice of three offices to work from.

He is often at the Perdana Leadership Foundation office in Putrajaya which is the most spacious, but Fridays find him at the Al-Bukhary Foundation office because he likes to pray at the nearby Masjid Negara.

But the Petronas Twin Towers office was one of a kind. It was physically the highest office in the land, it smelt of oil money and it always felt like one could almost touch the clouds when up there.

The former premier is now left with only two offices after the Cabinet removed him as Petronas adviser on Friday. The termination was the latest blow to Dr Mahathir, who has been waging war on Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak.

For the longest time ever, Dr Mahathir was like some sort of sacred cow – he was untouchable and could say and do as he liked.

But not anymore. The gloves have come off for Najib or as some put it, the Prime Minister has donned the iron fist. The Petronas post was a non-executive one but it had immense symbolic significance



JOCELINE TAN
analysis

and Najib took it away.

The axe fell exactly a week after Dr Mahathir led a gathering of Opposition party leaders, Umno politicians and non-governmental organisations to sign a citizens' declaration calling for Najib's resignation.

Dr Mahathir has been hounding Najib for more than a year but ganging up with DAP's Lim Kit Siang was the last straw for many Umno members. There was an immediate outcry for Dr Mahathir's head.

All that would have been worth it for Dr Mahathir if there was a chance of Najib being toppled. Instead, it resulted in a circling of the wagon in Umno.

"It has helped us like some kind of superglue. I got so many SMSes that day, everybody was using the angry emoji," said Kapar Umno division chief Datuk Faizal Abdullah.

The Umno crowd had grown resigned to Dr Mahathir's attacks but they could not accept that he

was prepared to engage the Opposition, especially DAP's Lim, to topple their president. Lim is a hero to the Chinese, but so many Umno members have been psycho-ed to regard him as the devil himself.

The citizens' declaration encompasses almost everything that the parties involved want, from Najib's resignation to institutional reform.

Yet the document has been like a knife cutting through the respective political parties. It is the most divisive thing to have happened since the break-up of Pakatan Rakyat.

It has reportedly garnered some 25,000 online signatures so far. But it is quite clear by now that the campaign is not a roaring success.

The reason is not the campaign but the personalities behind it. There has been such overwhelming opposition to Dr Mahathir leading a campaign that talks about reform. The prevailing opinion is that he should be the last person to talk about reform.

It has been quite a shock to learn that this once great man commands so little credibility among Malaysians. His advocates have been claiming that Generation Y-ers love and look up to him.

But a Selangor DAP leader said the young group in his Facebook account has been most critical of Dr Mahathir's role in the declaration.

"I am not with Dr Mahathir but I personally support the campaign. It can help DAP, especially in Selangor, but the response from young people surprised me," said the DAP politician.

The silence from the DAP side is telling. They can sense that their Chinese base is turned off by Dr Mahathir.

"The Chinese media is a good indication. So many commentaries on the issue and most of it critical. The editors have been whacking Dr Mahathir like nobody's business," said Fui Soong, chief executive officer of the Cense think-tank.

PAS does not want to get involved. Its president Datuk Seri Hadi Awang told Parliament that the culture of sacking leaders is not encouraged in Islam, alluding to the Arab Spring that resulted in chaos.

Apart from Dr Mahathir, Bersih chairman Maria Chin Abdullah also came under fire. There has been disappointment about her involvement and it has cast aspersions on her organisation.

Dr Mahathir wanted to ride on

her awesome reputation but critics have accused her of trying to use him to do image repair after the "Chinese Bersih".

The "topple Najib" campaign will chip away at Najib's image, but it has damaged Dr Mahathir much more. He was frustrated that Umno refused to come along with him against Najib and that was why he took his case to those outside of Umno.

It must have come as a shocker to this once influential politician that ordinary Malaysians were so critical of his past actions and that they do not trust him.

How could such an astute politician have misread the ground so badly? Is it age or has he been blinded by his sense of revenge? Surely he knows that revenge is a dish best served cold.

Many Malaysians were prepared to overlook his mistakes and faults when he retired in 2003. They were grateful that he took the country from a third world nation to a modern and technological state.

But his post-retirement behaviour and inability to let go have caused people to dredge up the negative aspects of his time in power.

His legacy is in danger and it is largely through his own doing.