

The X-factor in Dr M
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Former premier Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad has faced many critical elections but the next general election will see him fighting like never before.

TUN Dr Mahathir Mohamad is quite used to people telling him that he looks good for his age.

He will be 87 in a couple of months and at a recent function in Kedah, he joked: "People tell me I look young but the fact is I am going to be 87 soon. Even if I switch the numbers from 87 to 78, that is still old. There is no running from it."

But, said Sungai Tiang assemblywoman Suraya Yaakob, the former premier's schedule in Kedah over the last few months has resembled that of a 50-year-old man's rather than that of a man in his 80s.

"He is determined to help us win in Kedah," said Suraya.

Dr Mahathir's trips to Kedah used to be confined to what some call his other love, Langkawi, where he would hop into a car and drive himself to his appointments, meet people and look at the development.

But he is said to be on the campaign trail in Kedah. Last weekend, he addressed a gathering of Kedah Umno grassroots leaders in Alor Setar where many faces who had been missing from the political scene since 2008 were there for him. They included people who had felt slighted by the previous leadership or what the Malays would describe as *merajuk*. They had been inactive or had kept a low profile and Dr Mahathir is trying to draw them out of inactivity.

Among them was Datuk Seri Syed Razak Syed Zain who was replaced as Mentri Besar in 2005 after a stroke. Since then, he had avoided Umno events in Kedah. He has aged and lost weight, his left hand looks stiff and he drags his left leg when he walks but apart from that, he was his usual garrulous self.

His appearance on stage, seated beside Dr Mahathir, was yet another sign of the shift taking place on the ground.

Syed Razak was dropped as a candidate in 2008 and Kubang Rotan, the seat he had held since 1995, fell to PAS. He is a Mahathir man and had been the strongman in the Kuala Kedah division. It is no secret that his supporters resented the way he was ousted. As a result, PAS and PKR made a clean sweep in his area in the 2008 election, winning the Parliamentary as well as the three State seats.

Syed Razak was a popular Mentri Besar, the sort whose house is open to all and sundry. He could speak the northern style Hokkien and frequents the Chinese *kopitiam* to chat with the local folk.

Dr Mahathir had personally called him two months ago to ask him to throw his weight behind Kedah Umno again, especially in Kuala Kedah where he has family, friends and supporters and to get them to come out for the party in the election.

But several big names were missing, among them Padang Terap chief and former Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Mahdzir Khalid, who was overseas with the King. Kulim Bandar Baru chief Datuk Aziz Sheikh Fadzir, whose elder brother Tan Sri Kadir suddenly quit Umno last month, was also overseas.

Kubang Pasu chief Datuk Johari Baharum was also absent which was not surprising. Johari is still in Dr Mahathir's bad books for his role in blocking the elder man's bid to be a delegate to the 2006 Umno general assembly.

When told of Johari's absence, Dr Mahathir had said: "Well, he does not like me so much, I also don't like him that much. But if he is picked as a candidate, I will still vote for him."

Party man

It was his way of telling those present that he has not forgiven Johari but the party is bigger than the individual and as a party man, he is prepared to overlook his feelings about Johari.

Dr Mahathir understands Kedah politics very well. He knows that sabotage is the eighth of the Seven Deadly Sins in Umno.

As such, when speaking to the gathering, he asked the division chiefs on the stage to stand up and pledge that they would not indulge in sabotage if they were not picked as election candidates. They rose to their feet and raised their hands high above their heads; some were enthusiastic and raised both hands but there were a few hands that were neither up nor down.

However, political pledges are not etched in stone and Dr Mahathir quipped in the Kedah slang, "*Depa janji ini boleh pakai tak?*" (Is this a serious promise?)

The fall of Kedah came as a great shock to him; it was something he did not think he would see in his lifetime. Many attributed the defeat in Kedah to his fight with Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and the fact he had resigned from Umno.

"Kedah people were not happy to see him treated that way. There were Umno members who did not go out to vote," said a senior Kedah civil servant.

For more than a year after Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak came in as Prime Minister, there was endless chatter in a pro-Pakatan Rakyat news portal that Dr Mahathir was trying to topple Najib the way he had tried to get rid of Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. It didn't make any sense but that was what subscribers to the news portal wanted to believe and the portal churned out the reports until they died a natural death.

It is crystal clear by now that the man Dr Mahathir wants out is none other than Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim. He will do what it takes to stop Anwar from becoming Prime Minister. He has said some pretty outrageous stuff about Anwar which the latter has not rebutted. The PKR de facto leader knows he cannot take on Dr Mahathir.

And it is not only Dr Mahathir who wants Najib to win the next general election; Tun Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali is also rooting for Najib. The couple are committed to Umno.

During the big Umno anniversary bash at the Bukit Jalil Stadium, the former First Lady lost her usual composure and was overwhelmed by emotion. She was crying openly as those seated nearby passed her wads of tissue.

Dr Siti Hasmah had been deeply shocked and upset over the violence and vandalism that erupted at the Bersih protests. The gentle being in her saw it as some form of social breakdown and disintegration.

According to Wanita Umno veteran Tan Sri Napsiah Omar, the atmosphere at the Umno gathering, the deafening roars from the crowd for Dr Mahathir and the focus of Najib's speech touched Dr Siti Hasmah deep within and the dam broke. When Najib went up to her after his speech, she gave him a motherly hug and kissed him on the cheek.

"I think what she saw that evening helped restore her spirits," said Napsiah.

Dr Mahathir has also been addressing Umno groups in Selangor and Penang.

"Tun Mahathir is a big political factor for us. He was outside Umno in 2008, that cost us votes. He has impact, influence and relevance. Not many can be that age and still be fighting," said Selangor Barisan coordinator Datuk Seri Mohd Zin Mohamed.

Seen it, done it

What the elder statesman says carries weight because he's been there, seen it, done it. And he has been right on more occasions than he has been wrong. And as he has willingly admitted on several occasions, "my big mistake was picking Anwar".

Dr Mahathir's hosts in Penang last Sunday were the Umno Veterans Club of Penang and the key man behind it was no less than Fadzil Shuib, a die-hard Mahathir admirer.

"The veterans in Umno have a big role in the election. We figure that each veteran can bring in at least 10 votes from his wife, children, grandchildren and their in-laws. That's what we are looking at," said Fadzil who is also president of the Tanjong Malays Association.

Umno is also turning to Mubarak, an association comprising former Barisan elected representatives, for help. Many of those in this association were elected during Dr Mahathir's administration and he will be playing a role in rallying their support and commitment.

Some in Umno think Dr Mahathir is going all out in Kedah because his son Datuk Mukhriz is said to be the forerunner for the Mentri Besar post. But at the Alor Setar event, he did not make a single reference to his son who was also seated on the stage. Going by his speech and body language, it was as though Kedah Umno chief Datuk Ahmad Bashah Md Hanipah was on course to become the Mentri Besar in the event of a win.

The Mahathir name has a certain magic in Kedah. When Suraya invited Mukhriz to her constituency during Chinese New Year, many Chinese ladies, old and young, poured out to meet "anak Mahathir" in the flesh. They held on to his hand and peered at his face, as though looking for any resemblance to his famous father; they probably noticed his father has more hair and is handsomer to boot.

One elderly lady in a wheelchair held his face in her hands and petted his smooth cheek. Mukhriz, who is Jerlun MP and a deputy minister, is seen as some sort of gamechanger in Kedah because of his appeal among the Mahathir admirers, the young who grew up with him as Prime Minister and, well, the senior Chinese ladies.

"Many Chinese here used to say that Tun Mahathir brought them business luck when he was the PM. They said he gave them good fengshui," said Suraya.

When Suraya met Dr Mahathir at a Mubarak dinner in Alor Setar earlier this month, she teased him about his hectic schedule: "*Bini tak marah ke?*" (Did your wife scold you?)

"He had a good laugh. I know Tun Hasmah would not approve of the hectic pace, especially after his last heart surgery," said Suraya.

He told Suraya that if they want to invite him for programmes, they should hand the invitations personally to him because "my family hijacks some of my letters, they want me to rest at home".

Resting at home is the last thing on Dr Mahathir's mind at the moment. Like every politician in the country, his mind is on the general election.

Besides, he is not the sit-at-home-and-shake-legs kind of guy. A day after his Umno meetings in Kedah and Penang, he jetted off to Tokyo where he is a must-have personality at the annual Nikki Conference. He returns today to start another full week.

Dr Mahathir has faced his share of critical general elections but the next one is the most daunting even though he is no longer the Prime Minister. This election, he has told many people, is about the survival of Umno.

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