

Mahathir Wing of UMNO Turns The Screws on Najib
Asia Sentinel
20 January 2014

Former prime minister's wing veers towards open warfare

Pressure is continuing to rise against Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak, the latest in the form of an exclusive interview with Mahathir scion Mukhriz in the Malay-language newspaper *Berita Harian* Sunday expressing concern that the ruling national coalition could lose the next national elections under Najib's guidance.

Mukhriz's statement, carefully couched to describe Najib's economic policy in doing away with subsidies as "correct but unpopular," is being regarded as an open volley against the prime minister fired by the wing of the United Malays National Organization loyal to former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad. On the same weekend that Mukhriz was giving the interview with *Berita Harian*, former Finance Minister Daim Zainuddin, a long-time ally of the elder Mahathir, spoke to members of the suburban UMNO division in Kuala Lumpur that he once headed to say largely the same thing – and add that "It is up to you to ask him to step down."

The pressure so far is coming from within Najib's party. Despite steeply rising prices, there has been little pressure for angry citizens to take to the streets.

The elder Mahathir and Daim have been extremely critical of Najib since the May 5 national election, in which the Barisan Nasional lost the popular vote to the opposition for the first time since 1969 but prevailed in the parliament through gerrymandering and the first-past-the-post voting system.

Mukhriz, now the chief minister of the state of Kedah, said defeat in the next election, due in 2018, is a real possibility if the prime minister continues with his "present policy of correct but unpopular decisions."

Those "correct but unpopular decisions" revolve around cuts in subsidies that have resulted in sudden and dramatic bounces in the price of many staples, including petrol, chicken, vegetables, prawns, sugar and, according to the UMNO-owned Malay Mail, *kangkong*, also known as water spinach or morning glory, which grows wild on roadsides and waterways. Najib drew widespread derision recently when he responded to criticism over rising prices by saying the price of kangkong had fallen. Malaysians began mocking the prime minister as being out of touch, a complaint that made it all the way onto the BBC news.

In a translation of Mukhriz's remarks by *The Malaysian Insider*, a Kuala Lumpur-based news portal, the 49-year-old Mukhriz said that "Barisan Nasional's performance in the last general elections shows that we have not fully regained the [people's] confidence. I am very worried that although we have implemented good policies, we have ignored the issue of popularity. If the voters already have a negative perception of Barisan Nasional, it will not matter whether we have done the right thing or not."

With national and intraparty elections out of the way last year, the government acted to reverse a flock of subsidies that have driven the country's fiscal debt close to the statutory limit of 55 percent of GDP and are a source of growing international concern by investors and economists. Those subsidy costs were compounded by a flock of government pay raises and programs designed to lure ethnic Malays into

voting for the Barisan. During the campaign, Najib also assured voters in his election manifesto there would be no major rises in the cost of living.

“Economically, cutting the subsidies was astute, but politically it has been disastrous,” said a longtime UMNO member. “For now Najib has to realize the situation on the ground. He and his cabinet have lost touch with reality.”

Najib’s holiday visit to the US gaming mecca of Las Vegas – with gambling anathema to Muslims – has also drawn widespread criticism in UMNO, as has the luxurious lifestyle of the premier’s wife Rosmah Mansor.

The prime minister is unlikely to be driven from power, however, unless there is a groundswell in the local divisions of the party to call for an emergency general meeting to pass a no-confidence vote. He was reelected president of the party, the country’s biggest, by acclamation. He controls a strong majority of the 40-member Supreme Council, either through his own loyalists or through those aligned with former Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who have made common cause with Najib against the Mahathir wing. Nor will the rebels attempt to oust him through a no-confidence vote in the parliament, which would result in the near destruction of the party.

Part of what is contributing to the prime minister’s staying power is that there appears no one on the horizon who is prepared to take him on. Mukhriz is regarded as too young, and was turned down by the rank and file in intra-party elections to become one of the party’s three vice presidents. Muhyiddin Yassin, the current deputy prime minister, is 66 years of age and is expected to retire from politics after his current stint. Khairy Jamaluddin, Abdullah Badawi’s son-in-law, is only 38 and in any case is regarded as a deeply polarizing figure.

The elder Mahathir himself is increasingly mentioned as possibly coming back, either as an “advisor” along the lines of Lee Kuan Yew, the “minister mentor” in Singapore until he retired from politics, or as prime minister, a move that would send shudders through the minority community in Malaysia because of his increasing alignment with Perkasa, the ultra-nationalist Malays-first organization headed by Ibrahim Ali.

The only alternative is to take the route Daim appears to have embarked on, a Kuala Lumpur-based political observer said, and that is to go to the grassroots of the party and seek to embarrass him enough to force him to step down voluntarily.

In any instance, with no one strong enough to challenge the prime minister, the continuing prognosis for debilitating infighting within UMNO seems the most likely scenario. But there also appears little scope for the opposition, headed by Anwar Ibrahim, to take advantage of the situation. Pakatan Rakyat, split between three strikingly dissimilar parties with different ethnic agendas, seems ill equipped to be able to capitalize.

Copyright © 2005 - 2014 Asia Sentinel.

Source: <http://www.asiasentinel.com/politics/mahathir-wing-umno-najib/>