

## **Is Time Running Out for Najib?**

**Asia Sentinel**

**24 January 2014**

### **Mahathir and his allies want to set a date for Malaysia's prime minister to move out**

Forces aligned with former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad appear to be attempting push embattled Malaysian Premier Najib Tun Razak into giving a time frame for his eventual departure from office and naming a successor, sources in Kuala Lumpur say.

The sources say that successor could be hard-line Home Affairs Minister Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, 61, who was once an ally of opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim when Anwar was still in Mahathir's government. Zahid is third in line for succession and his rise would bypass Muhyiddin Yassin, the current deputy president of UMNO and deputy prime minister, who is 66. Muhyiddin has said he will retire soon.

It should be noted that Najib operates from a position of relative invulnerability, given that both national and intraparty elections are out of the way, leaving him secure at least until the next UMNO general assembly late this year. However, the scenario, the sources say, is similar to that forced upon Najib's immediate predecessor, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who was pushed come up with a timeline in 2008 after the Barisan's disastrous political showing in general elections. At that time, the ruling coalition lost its two-thirds majority in parliament for the first time in history. The campaign to push out Badawi lasted from the May 2008 election until April 2009, when Najib took office.

Although Mahathir left office as prime minister in 2003, he has kept up a constant barrage of criticism about the way the country has been run, quitting UMNO near the end of Badawi's reign in supposed outrage over party politics. He reawakened with force after the 2013 general election, charging that Najib's election strategy of reaching out to the country's 40 percent of minority voters was a mistake.

Najib is also under heavy public pressure because of rising prices due to the withdrawal of subsidies and other reasons, not least of which is dissatisfaction with the ostentatious behavior of his wife, Rosmah Mansor. He has also been widely criticized for being out of touch with the *rakyat*, or citizenry. He was ridiculed for saying that while some prices had gone up, the price of "kangkong [water spinach] has fallen but why don't they praise the government?"

The drumbeat of anger over corruption in UMNO also continues, with the Mahathir forces alleging that vote-buying was used to deny Mahathir's politician son Mukhriz a top position in last September's UMNO party elections.

An increasing number of Mahathir's long-time allies, including former New Straits Times editor-in-chief A. Kadir Jasin and Zainuddin Maidin, the former information minister, have called for the prime minister to take the 88-year-old Mahathir back into government as a "minister mentor" akin to what Lee Kuan Yew did in Singapore from 2004 to 2011 before ostensibly retiring from politics. Former Finance Minister Daim Zainuddin, another Mahathir ally, has also made public statements disparaging Najib's premiership.

Mukhriz on Sunday gave an interview to the Malay-language newspaper Berita

Harian, saying that "Defeat [in the next general election] is a real possibility if Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak continues with his present policy of correct but unpopular decisions, especially on issues concerning the rising cost of living,"

Mukhriz was subsequently slapped down publicly by Tengku Adnan Tenku Mansor, the UMNO secretary general, and told to use party channels to express his concerns.

Some sources in Kuala Lumpur say the move to return Mahathir to government is unlikely to succeed. One UMNO source aligned with the Mahathir wing of the party, said the real game is getting Najib to move along.

"The ball is in Najib's court," he said. "If he prefers war, he will get it."

Zahid Hamidi has been regarded as something of a loose cannon. Once a close Anwar ally, Zahid was arrested and held in prison along with Anwar in 1998. However, he later returned to UMNO saying Anwar had impelled him to raise allegations of cronyism and nepotism in the party.

Since becoming home affairs minister, he has issued a number of incendiary statements against opponents who were unhappy with the political system after the Barisan lost the popular vote but held onto its majority in parliament.

He has threatened to crack down on opposition leaders, dissent and crime. During a speech in Malacca, he was recorded as saying police should "shoot to kill" gangsters in a campaign to cut down violent crime. He has also become a lightning rod for making racially inflammatory remarks that have alienated the Chinese and Indian minority.

Copyright © 2005 - 2014 Asia Sentinel.

Source: <http://www.asiasentinel.com/politics/time-running-najib-tun-razak/>

