

Mahathir no longer untouchable
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Najib is showing a more brazen approach against dissent, one that highlights his loyalty-first policy.

After nearly a year of campaigning against Prime Minister Najib Razak, former premier Mahathir Mohamad is now the subject of an investigation for defamation, thanks to two police reports lodged against him. For those who have been following the saga, this must come as a bit of a surprise. After all, we've all had a good laugh poking fun at the Bugis Warrior who never confronts his enemies.

Mahathir, as the longest reigning prime minister of this country, has left an indelible mark on the psyche of this country, albeit not always positive. For a while, we thought that legacy left him untouchable. While others were arrested and harassed at the slightest hint of criticism, Mahathir had free rein to appear at gatherings and protests to deride the PM, and there seemed little that Najib could do about it.

However, we're now seeing a more brazen approach by the PM. It is a sign of just how confident he is, and if Mahathir is charged with defamation, it will be a message from Najib to Mahathir that spells, "I am not afraid of you." It will be Najib's declaration that Mahathir's time is over, and that he is confident enough of support from Umno that he is willing to take action on all dissenters, regardless of who they are.

It also would mean that he is sure he will not suffer too severe a backlash from the grassroots, but convincing them that Mahathir must be punished will be another challenge altogether.

Najib may not be a fearless leader, but he has proven to be a cunning one, and this is merely the first strike in painting the former PM as a villain, the framing of which has been reinforced by Tourism and Culture Minister Nazri Abdul Aziz, who called Mahathir an "unprincipled hypocrite."

This is not to say that Mahathir will be charged today, or even tomorrow. But that Najib is willing to have him investigated is a watershed moment in the drama involving the two and bodes ill for Mahathir's efforts.

Mahathir will always have his loyalists and agents, and even if he is imprisoned, they will continue his work. But this moment is a symbolic one. It highlights Najib's loyalty-first policy.

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