

Malaysian PM Razak 'destroying the country', says veteran former leader

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Mahathir Mohamad interview: Veteran ex-leader accuses scandal-plagued prime minister Najib Razak of 'destroying' country as he defies protégé to prosecute him

Malaysia's embattled prime minister is "destroying" the country as he clings to power despite a billion-pound financial scandal that is the target of several international investigations, its longest-serving leader has told the Telegraph.

Mahathir Mohamad delivered a withering critique of his former protégé **Najib Razak** as he repeated corruption allegations and defied the government to take him to court after a recent police visit.

In his 91st year, Dr Mahathir has completed an unlikely transformation from elder statesmen to political dissident in **the country** that he led for 22 years as a prime minister with a "strongman" reputation.

He has now emerged as the ringleader of a new anti-Najib coalition, **forging an alliance with opposition leaders** who were once bitter rivals in the mission to topple the British-educated prime minister.

Even Anwar Ibrahim, **his jailed former deputy**, has thrown his support behind the Mahathir campaign, putting an end to the country's longest-running enmity.

Mr Najib's own brother has described this landscape of internecine warfare, where former foes unite and erstwhile allies feud, as Malaysia's **"Game of Thrones"** – a reference to the television series about warring medieval nobility.

Mr Najib has faced sustained pressure to resign since last year over his links to a **heavily indebted state investment fund** that he established as well as payments into his private accounts totalling nearly \$700 million.

Mr Najib has denied any wrongdoing and maintained that he has not used the funds for personal gain, with aides saying the payments were a **political donation from the Saudi royal family**.

Dr Mahathir became an increasingly fierce critic of Mr Najib as the financial scandal deepened. "But he's now moved into a martyrdom mission," one political observer told the Telegraph. "He'll do anything to bring down Najib."

The provincial doctor who went on to become the father of modern Malaysia laid out his plans in an interview in his cavernous office on the 86th floor of the Petronas Towers, the world's tallest buildings at the time they were constructed during his rule.

"I'll work with anyone who shares the objective of getting rid of Najib Razak as prime minister," he said. "Our country can no longer take this corruption."

Dr Mahathir talked to the Telegraph shortly after quitting the United Malays National Organisation, the party that has ruled Malaysia for the six decades since independence from Britain in 1957. A few days earlier, his son Mukhriz was forced out as a state chief minister by **Najib loyalists**.

"The party has become a vehicle dedicated to preserving and supporting Najib in office, protecting him despite all the wrong things he is doing," he said.

"It became embarrassing to be a member and staying in the party would be a hindrance to what I need to do now."

Dr Mahathir said that a stream of "visitors" urging him to use his power and influence had called at his office, where arrivals are greeted with panoramic views of the modern city that he helped create.

"People come to see me and asked me to act," he said. "It's my duty. They say that the prime minister is destroying the country."

He had another set of visitors recently – police dispatched to question him for an investigation into possible criminal defamation.

They paid their call after Dr Mahathir opined that the Najib-appointed attorney general had "no credibility" for clearing his boss of criminal wrongdoing over a US\$681 million "gift" from the Saudi royal family.

“The police came here to my office, but I refused to answer their questions,” he said. “I told them that if they wanted to question me, they should do it in court, where everyone can hear what I have to say and my lawyers can question them.

He smiled and shook his head when asked if he was worried about a possible prosecution. “If I’m made to appear in court, I’ll be happy to answer,” he said. “They are trying to rule by intimidation, but I am ready for it.”

The show of unity by anti-Najib forces was greeted with derision by a spokesman for the prime minister. “Mahathir and his former enemies have demonstrated the depth of their political opportunism and desperation,” he said, noting the Mr Najib’s critics must wait for the next general election, due in 2018, if they want to replace him.

And Mr Najib has kept his tight grip on power since the scandal began by purging Cabinet critics and **cracking down on dissent** from media and academics.

As part of the crackdown, the authorities last year blocked access to Sarawak Report, a website run by former British prime minister Gordon Brown’s sister-in-law **Clare Rewcastle Brown**. The Malaysians later **issued an arrest warrant for the London-based journalist**, who was born in colonial Malaya.

The government has also now just blocked Malaysian Insider, a news website, after it published a story saying that the state anti-corruption agency had found “credible evidence” to charge Mr Najib.

The latest moves even prompted the United States to issue a rare but stern rebuke to Malaysia, an **ally of the West** trade and security deals, over its muzzling of the free press.

“We have laws to deal with corruption, but our prime minister is undermining rule of law,” said Dr Mahathir. “He can’t be allowed to get away with this. If you question him, if you go to the police, you could end up being detained and charged yourself.”

Dr Mahathir and Mr Najib’s sacked deputy Muhyiddin Yassin have also claimed that the country’s previous attorney general was ousted when he was on the verge of filing charges against the prime minister.

“If these allegations aren’t true, why doesn’t Najib sue?” asked Dr Mahathir. “He denies them, but chooses not to sue. And instead his new attorney general wants to jail government whistle-blowers for life. That is how they deal with these allegations.”

He focused on the “lavish lifestyle” of Mr Najib’s second wife Rosmah Mansor, who is renowned for her overseas shopping trips and love of luxury handbags, and raised questions about the family’s ties to a playboy financier called Jho Low.

Dr Mahathir acknowledged that for as long as Mr Najib and his allies dominate the domestic political landscape, it is unlikely that domestic investigations will bring him down.

But he predicted that several foreign investigations could provide a more potent threat to the administration. “These foreign inquiries are more likely to determine what happens here,” he said.

Notably, US federal investigators are digging into allegations of possible misuse in New York of funds linked to 1MDB, the sovereign wealth fund that Mr Najib established and whose advisory board he chairs.

Mr Low, an informal adviser when 1MDB was formed, burst into Manhattan high-society circles in recent years, where he became a regular in the gossip columns as he also oversaw a buying spree of upmarket apartments and art masterpieces.

He is widely believed to be **the anonymous buyer** who laid out \$141 million plus fees last May for Picasso’s “Women of Algiers”— **the most expensive painting ever purchased at auction**.

Mr Low has also been a close friend of Mr Najib’s stepson Riza Aziz since the two met at boarding school in Britain.

Mr Aziz has since emerged as a Hollywood financier, most notably **helping to bankroll The Wolf of Wall Street** starring Leonardo DiCaprio as an unscrupulous financial fraudster.

The FBI and Justice Department have also been gathering information about **the role of Goldman Sachs** as an adviser to 1MDB, which was said last year to have amassed debts of \$11 billion.

Tim Leissner, **the bank's high-flying chairman of its South East Asian operations**, returned to the US for "personal leave" and then left the company this month. His wife, **Kimora Lee Simmons**, the fashion designer, former model and television personality, had used social media to publicise her friendship with Mr Najib's wife, Rosmah Mansor.

In Switzerland, prosecutors investigating 1MDB said last month that they believed around US\$4bn had been stolen from Malaysian state-owned companies in funding that was earmarked for economic and social development projects.

Hong Kong and Singapore also investigating 1MDB's activities. And in a separate inquiry, French officials are pursuing allegations that bribes were paid in a lucrative submarine purchase deal when Mr Najib served as defence minister. The Malaysian leader has denied any wrongdoing.

That French investigation has also put the spotlight back on one of the most salacious episodes in recent Malaysian history – the murder of a Mongolian model who was the girlfriend of a Najib friend involved in the submarine deal.

Two government bodyguards have been convicted of killing her and blowing up her body with explosives. "The bodyguards have confessed," said Dr Mahathir. "Bodyguards follow orders. So who gave those orders?"

The former prime minister's re-entry into the tumult of Malaysian politics at an age when most former leaders would be enjoying an easy retirement has surprised few.

Dr Mahathir is a famously combative figure who has never been one to avoid high-profile political and diplomatic scraps, including two he waged with his country's former colonial power.

In the early 1980s, he launched a "Buy British Last" government trade campaign in response to a commercial row with a London-based rubber company and the UK government's sharp rise in foreign tuition fees that hit Malaysian students hard. The stand-off was eventually smoothed at a meeting with Lady Thatcher when the "iron lady" and "strongman" struck a good relationship.

And then in 1994 he imposed a British trade ban after media coverage over the **aid-for-arms scandal** about a British-funded Malaysian dam involved a Sunday Times story associating Dr Mahathir with bribery – an accusation robustly denied by the then leader.

Domestically, Dr Mahathir already ousted one previous prime minister, his immediate successor, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, with whom he fell out. He manoeuvred Mr Najib into office in his place in 2009 in an orchestrated political coup.

Mr Najib is a scion of Malaysian political royalty as the son of the country's second prime minister after independence. His father brought Dr Mahathir back into the fold after an early political split in UMNO. But in Malaysia's "Game of Thrones", the younger Najib and his one-time mentor are now sworn enemies.

"I expected more," said Dr Mahathir. "He has let us all down. We cannot let this continue."

Source:

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/malaysia/12185570/Malaysian-PM-Razak-de-stroying-the-country-says-veteran-former-leader.html>