

Dr Mahathir says not proud of Malaysia after Najib's scandals

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Former leader Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad has lost pride in the country he governed for more than two decades, warning political tensions that have surrounded Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak for months could hand a fractured opposition victory at the next elections.

In a wide-ranging interview, Dr Mahathir, 90, renewed his months long calls for the prime minister to step aside, saying Malaysia under Najib's seven-year tenure had morphed from a stable, calm country where the economy was growing to a place that lacked tolerance.

"There was a time when I go abroad, people talk highly of Malaysia," Dr Mahathir said in a Bloomberg Television interview in Kuala Lumpur on February 25.

"Today, if we go abroad, we meet people, what they say is that 'hey, what's happening to your country?' That's what they say. And I am not proud because I can't explain what's happening in the country."

The feud between Dr Mahathir and Najib has grown increasingly acrimonious in recent months, with the former attacking Najib over a series of financial scandals and his economic record, and quitting the ruling party.

Dr Mahathir is under investigation for potential defamation and had another visit from police last week.

While his influence has faded in recent years, the public sparring creates risk for Umno, which has ruled since independence in 1957 but whose broader Barisan Nasional coalition won the last elections in 2013 with its slimmest margin yet.

Probes continue

Their dispute reflects a broader concern about a sense of drift in Malaysia: while an investigation into US\$681 million that authorities said was a personal donation in 2013 from the Saudi Arabian royal family to Najib has largely wrapped up, several probes continue into the finances of debt-ridden state investment fund 1Malaysia Development Bhd, whose advisory board the prime minister chairs.

The Wall Street Journal reported yesterday that hundreds of millions of dollars also went into Najib's accounts in 2011 and 2012. A 1MDB spokesman said the company has consistently maintained it hadn't paid any funds to the personal accounts of the prime minister.

The various affairs have raised fresh questions over transparency and doing business in Malaysia, dented markets and helped spur a 21% slump in approved investment last year, all at a time economic growth is slowing.

Najib has repeatedly denied any wrongdoing, saying he and Dr Mahathir disagreed over economic policies and that no "individual, however eminent" should try to interfere with or hijack his leadership.

He retains the backing of the bulk of Umno's powerful divisional chiefs and the opposition remains weak, its coalition having imploded after then-leader Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim – a one-time deputy to Dr Mahathir – was sent to jail again last year on a sodomy conviction, a charge he denies.

Still, Dr Mahathir said voters were worried enough to switch support from Umno, while state institutions, including the police and the Attorney-General's Chambers, were being undermined by Najib's actions after the revelation of the money in his accounts.

Najib shouldn't have accepted the funds as no leader "should have that kind of money", he said.

"When we talk to people, they are disgusted with the government," Dr Mahathir said. "On my blog, they say the same thing. They all feel this is a bad government where it doesn't do anything that is good for the country, that it undermines the system."

Attorney-General Tan Seri Mohamed Apandi Ali in January closed the door on the graft investigation into Najib, clearing him of wrongdoing. Najib returned US\$620 million in August 2013 that was not utilised, Apandi said. He did not specify what the rest of the funds were used for.

'Don't accept'

"Any prime minister who has US\$681 million with him is not doing something right," Dr Mahathir said from his office on the 86th floor of the world's tallest twin towers.

"Even if it is given to him by a foreigner, you still don't accept."

Dr Mahathir led Malaysia from 1981 to 2003, a period when the economy grew an average 6.3% annually. He was famous for rejecting an International Monetary Fund bailout for Malaysia during the 1998 Asian Financial Crisis, instead introducing capital controls and pegging the ringgit.

He advocated a moderate brand of Islam and stressed modernisation but had little tolerance for dissent and used sedition laws to curb it.

He was a vocal critic of US policy in the Middle East and its invasion of Iraq while he was in power. Najib's predecessor Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi stepped down in 2009 as his popularity within Umno faded, fuelled in part by resignation calls from Dr Mahathir.

Sidelining detractors

"During my time, we had problems of course, political problems," Dr Mahathir said.

"But now what we are seeing is that, if anybody says anything against Najib, that is almost a crime."

Najib is sidelining detractors as he cements his grip on Umno: the Supreme Council suspended party deputy president Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin on Friday for undermining Umno in his quest to remove Najib from office, weeks after the prime minister's allies manoeuvred the ouster of Dr Mahathir's son – another critic – as Kedah menteri besar.

Dr Mahathir said there is little way to tell how much public support he has. Divisional chiefs are "keeping quiet because they have to support the prime minister".

At the general level, "lots of people come up to me and say 'we support you' but that's what they say. But they are also scared to be heard saying they support me."

Dr Mahathir said voters were angry over rising costs from transportation to food as the government removes subsidies and after the implementation of a goods and services tax last year.

Living costs

"The cost of living has gone up because of GST," said Dr Mahathir.

"Toll rates have gone up, the minimum wage has gone up, which means the cost of doing business, the cost of production has gone up."

Najib has moved since 2013 to shore up his main support among rural-based Malays, giving bigger cash handouts to lower-income households to help them cope with rising costs. Dr Mahathir disagrees with the cash handouts.

The negative perception surrounding Najib will cost Umno votes even with a splintered opposition, Dr Mahathir said, while declining to name anyone he thought could replace Najib. The next general election is due by 2018. – Bloomberg, March 2, 2016.

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