

Mahathir's exit strategy
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For better or worse, Asia owes much of its collective face to a handful of authoritarian, single-minded leaders. They were possessed of a clear idea of where they wanted to take their countries usually to economic nirvana and of a supreme self-confidence that they knew best how to get there, even if it meant trampling on liberties along the way. As these strongmen saw it, for many Asian states the stakes were simply too high to take a chance on unbridled freedom: potential unrest in China, the specter of communism in Indonesia, the risk of being overshadowed by a neighbor like Singapore, the peril of racial conflagration in Malaysia. Through death, ouster or abdication, the Deng Xiaopings, Suhartos and Lee Kuan Yews have passed from the scene. And now if he goes ahead with his drawn-out exit strategy comes Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad's turn, perhaps closing the chapter on long-serving Asian leaders who, by sheer force of their personalities, transformed their nations.

It was on June 22, the last day of the annual general assembly of his United Malays National Organization (UMNO), that an emotional Mahathir abruptly announced his resignation in his closing speech. Shocked party leaders mobbed the PM in a bid to dissuade him. But three days later, amid feverish rumor and speculation, UMNO unveiled a transition plan allowing for Mahathir's departure next year. He would maintain all current posts, including those of Prime Minister and Finance Minister, until October 2003, after which his deputy, Abdullah Badawi, would take over.

The 16-month time frame, insisted UMNO leaders, was to ensure a smooth transition. But it is an unsatisfactory solution all round. Mahathir appears ineffectual, Abdullah may be besieged by political challengers all too aware that he cannot claim anywhere near Mahathir's mandate, and investors, who abhor uncertainty, may stay on the sidelines.

What seems clear is that Mahathir's resignation is no publicity gambit to shore up support. Even his detractors acknowledge that. "It's definitely not a put-on job or a political gimmick," says oppositionist Lim Kit Siang. (Though Mahathir had multiple-bypass surgery a decade ago, his health is robust for a 76-year-old.) But neither, it seems, does he wish to go because he feels he has accomplished enough and that it's time for younger leaders to take over as Lee Kuan Yew believed. Mahathir modernized the economy, enabled Malaysia to gain international respect, and gave Asia a voice in the global arena. But after decades of championing the indigenous Malay cause at home, Mahathir has become disillusioned. The Malays, he said during the UMNO assembly, "are lazy and like to find the easy way."

Today, despite years of preferential treatment, Malays account for no more than one-fifth of corporate ownership, even though they make up more than half the population. Mahathir's attempts to reintroduce English as the medium of instruction and to roll back education and possibly business quotas for Malays have met stiff resistance from ordinary Malays. And his patronage of key Malay businessmen has also been less than successful; many wound up bankrupt, forcing the government to bail them out. "He's fed up," says Azim Zabidi, a former member of UMNO's Supreme Council.

But if Mahathir was frustrated enough to quit, why did he agree to the extended 16-month transition period? The stated reason is that he has to host the Organization of Islamic Conference summit, scheduled for October next year. Many observers, however, see other

forces at work. According to one view, Mahathir wants to steer his anointed successor Abdullah, a likable if bland figure, through the next round of party elections in case anyone challenges him. Another theory postulates the opposite: Mahathir has no faith in Abdullah and wants to give other players enough time to jockey for power. "No one believes (Abdullah) is a serious contender for the No. 1 post," says political scientist P. Ramasamy. Yet another view states that the Prime Minister has been forced to stay on by "Mahathir-dependent forces," namely business interests that have traditionally relied on his backing. Whatever the real reason, the man himself isn't saying anything, having left for a vacation in Europe. Mahathir, a physician by training, once said that all he really wanted to be was a country doctor. Now that country Malaysia must ponder how to stay healthy without him.

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