

Mahathir's last stand?
www.time.com
Sep. 29, 1998
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If anyone still had any doubt that Malaysia's Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammed is a strongman of the old school, there is fresh proof in the bruises and welts on the face of ousted Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim. Anwar appeared in court Tuesday bearing the marks of beatings he says he suffered at the hands of the police. The popular reformer faces charges of corruption and illegal sex acts, widely viewed as part of a campaign by Mahathir to strip him of power. "Anwar was always seen as untouchable because he was so popular that moving against him might spark a rebellion," says TIME correspondent William Dowell. Unprecedented mass protests have, indeed, followed his arrest. "Things have gone so far now that Anwar's supporters may believe they have to overthrow Mahathir to get Anwar out of this mess," says Dowell. "As in Indonesia, the protests could make Malaysia's elite realize that it's time for Mahathir to go."

Malaysia may be even more volatile than Indonesia, however, because its army doesn't tend to stabilize the country the way that Indonesia's does. "Malaysia is a traditionally passive society, which occasionally explodes in a violent frenzy -- like the anti-Chinese riots in the '60s," says Dowell. "Remember, it was Malaysia's Bahasa language that gave us the phrase 'run amok.' "

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