

Baptism of fire for Mukhriz?

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Umno Youth politician Datuk Mukhriz Mahathir came under the hot glare of the national spotlight when he defended his father over the bridge issue. Has he burnt himself by going out of the party line? JOCELINE TAN reports.

DATUK Mukhriz Mahathir is hardly the controversial type. But the past few weeks have seen the mild-mannered Umno Youth politician take centre stage in a way that surprised many in his party.

Some even saw it as his political baptism of fire.

Mukhriz veered from the party line on the bridge issue when he chose to defend his father Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's stand over the government's decision to cancel the project.

This was one issue on which the government had decided and which had Umno expressing a party line on the decision.

The party line is not exactly etched in stone but in a party as big and powerful as Umno, discipline and making sure that members toe the line is a big part of its formula for staying on course.

"Keeping the party traditions ... that's how the party has survived," said political insider Datuk Annuar Zaini.

More jaws dropped when Mukhriz spoke on the issue at a political forum in Pulau, Johor. The son had become almost as controversial as the father.

So why did Mukhriz do it? Was it for purely filial reasons or did he, a northerner, really feel so strongly about the so-called scenic bridge?

"I know people think it's because of my dad but I didn't do it blindly. I did my own research, I wanted to know the facts before I opened my mouth. I listened to the ground and the feedback I got from Johor contradicted what I had been informed officially and I felt there ought to be a channel for views to be heard," he said.

Mukhriz insisted he had not disagreed with the government's decision to scrap the project but had stated what he saw as the facts behind the bridge proposal.

"It's not true that I asked to start a movement of sorts to push for it (the project). But I did say that if people still want it, they should voice it through the proper channels so that the government could reconsider it."

But the loyal son in him felt hurt that some had been so quick to attack his father without first listening to what he had to say.

"It was so easy for them to say he is an old man who should not interfere. I find it a bit disturbing that it was turned into an issue of interference rather than the voicing of a concern," he said.

Mukhriz, the fifth of the seven children of Dr Mahathir and Tun Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali, has often come across as thoughtful and soft-spoken, even somewhat reticent.

He seemed to have more of his mother in him than his father, and he was certainly less radical than his social activist sister Marina and not as flamboyant as his man-about-town brother Mokhzani.

"I was shocked. I didn't think he had it in him," said a Puteri Umno politician though not without some admiration.

Mukhriz stood up well under the pressure but he said: "I want it to end."

What about his father? Is Dr Mahathir also ready for a cooling down?

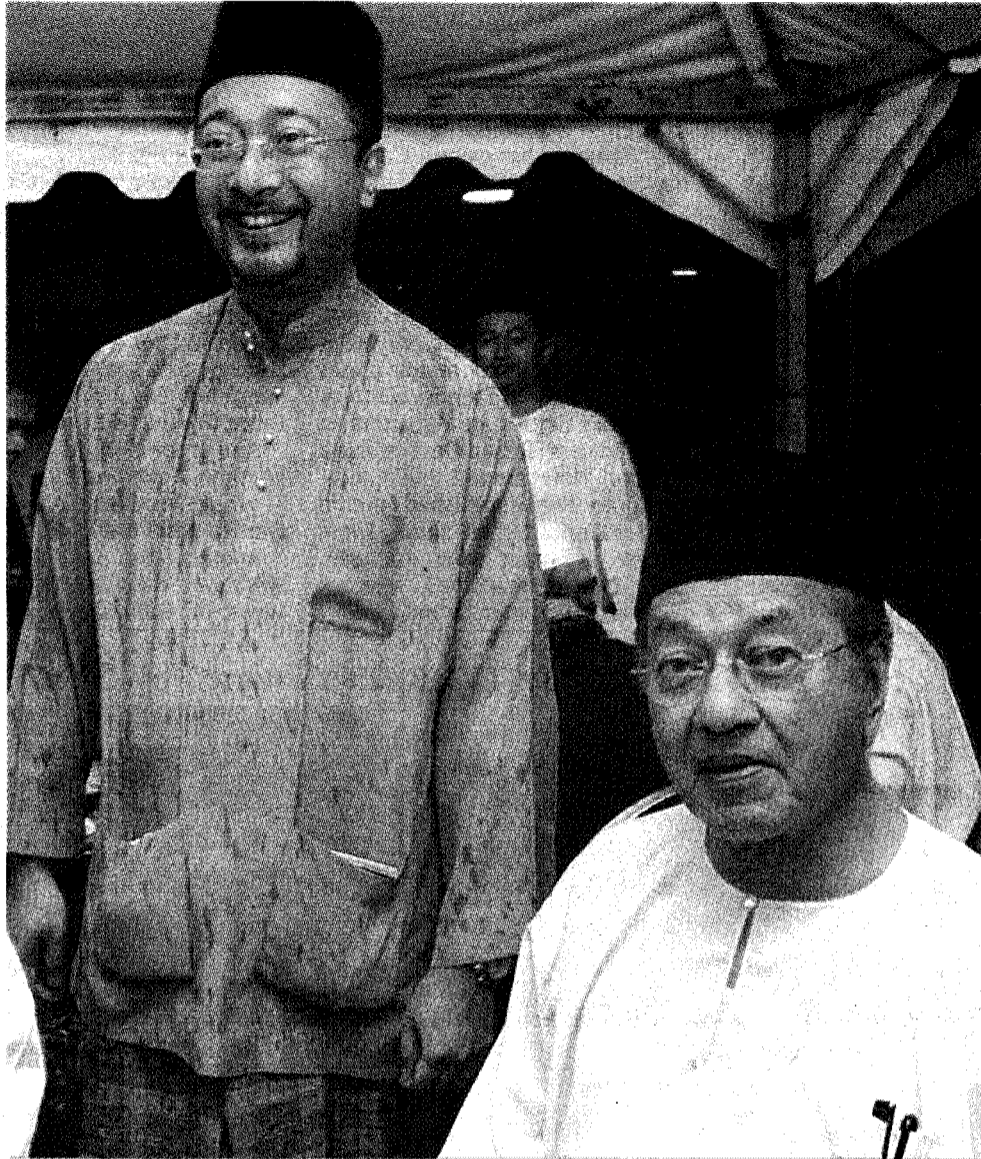
"I think my father will not say anything more unless he is asked by the media. He feels that if he is asked, it means that some people are still not clear about his stand and that he needs to clarify," said Mukhriz.

The question that also begs to be asked is whether Mukhriz has been scorched by his baptism of fire.

At the height of the issue, Mukhriz was criticised by some of his Umno Youth colleagues for not toeing the party line.

Others in the party thought he did what he had to do.

"If he did not come out for his father, he would lose respect among his peers. It was a



FATHER AND SON: Mukhriz went against the party line to defend his father's position on the bridge in Johor.



RAZALI: Defended the Cabinet's decision but is sad that the bridge proposal is off



JAZLAN: Caught between a rock and a hard place



POLITICAL INSIDER: Datuk Annuar Zaini said the PM's sense of patience calmed the situation

tough place to be ... *ditelan mati ibu, diluah mati bapa* (swallow and you lose your mother, spit it out and lose your father)," said political insider Annuar.

It is the Malay equivalent of being stuck between a rock and a hard place.

"Mukhriz is a good guy. He did what he thought was right. But what he thinks is right is not right in the eyes of the party," said Muar MP Razali Ibrahim.

A political secretary to a minister from Johor said: "What Mukhriz did went down well with people in Johor."

The bridge was a hot potato issue for the government.

But as a number of people have pointed out, it was hot primarily in Johor.

Many of those outside of Johor could not see what the fuss was about.

"What's the big deal about it? They already have two bridges (the causeway and the second link)," said one Kedah Umno figure.

Or according to an Umno politician from Selangor: "The thing is, it (proposed bridge) has commercial value only for Johor."

For the average Johorean, it was an opportunity lost and for a small privileged class, the loss of lucrative contracts.

But there is another reason: the Malaysia-Singapore rivalry is most keenly felt in Johor and among Johoreans, there is, rightly or wrongly, the perception that Singapore got its way on the bridge.

The Malays in Johor are among the most politically sophisticated and rational, but old emotions — some dating back to the 1965 separation, others a result of more recent events — still bubble to the surface when it comes to relations with their southern neighbour.

Feelings about the decision were definitely stronger in Johor than elsewhere as evident from the way the crowd applauded and called out, "Tun, Tun!", when the master of ceremony acknowledged Dr Mahathir's presence at the party's 60th anniversary rally in Johor Baru earlier this month.

Many Johor Umno leaders have been scrambling to do damage control as they tried to toe the party line on the one hand and contain the ground sentiment on the other.

In that sense, Mukhriz was not the only person caught between the proverbial rock and a hard place.

Razali, who is also Johor Umno Youth chief, had a hard time explaining to his party bosses when his Youth information head, Abdullah Yusof, persisted on going ahead with the Pulau forum that saw Mukhriz and several others speak on the issue.

Abdullah is also the Youth head for the Pulau division and his action landed his division chief Datuk Nur Jazlan Mohamed in the soup.

"I was in a quandary but I accept the responsibility for what happened," said Jazlan, also Pulau MP.

"As a Johorean, I'm sad that our dream to see a nice bridge in place of the causeway did not materialise. But the Cabinet has made a bold decision and Tun Mahathir has spoken his mind. I hope we can close the chapter and move on," said Razali.

Said Jazlan: "I tell people that the PM wants a straight bridge, at the cheapest cost and with the least diplomatic hassle. But that does not mean that discussions cannot be restarted in the future."

But the crisis was perhaps best contained by the non-confrontational attitude of the Prime Minister.

He did not react to provocation even though he had ample opportunity and the avenue to do so.

He was upset over some of the things said for he is after all human, but he held his peace and kept his innate sense of patience.

Said Annuar: "People I met said to me: 'If you see the PM, please ask him to keep cool. Tell him not to say anything when angry and to do the right thing'. I think the PM did just that."

As for Dr Mahathir, well, Dr Mahathir will be Dr Mahathir.

In the case of Mukhriz, it is likely that he was not left unscathed by the baptismal fire. One cannot possibly go against the leadership and hope to come out without burn marks.

But crises are important tests for any aspiring politician and, suffice to say, many in Umno now see him in a new light.