



Andy Wong/AP

Malaysia's former leader, Mahathir bin Mohamad, has struggled to get attention since leaving office.

Sidelined, not silenced, in Malaysia

*He ran government;
now he annoys it*

By Seth Mydans

KUALA LUMPUR: That angry voice in the wilderness is Mahathir bin Mohamad, the man who dominated Malaysia as prime minister for two decades and now, to his evident amazement, cannot seem to get the attention of the press he once controlled.

Ignored or pushed deep into the back pages like any inconvenient critic, he has turned to the alternative Internet sites that are the refuge of the powerless in Malaysia, sites he says he still despises.

"Where is the press freedom?" he exclaimed the other day, although he must know that it remains pretty much where he left it when he retired three years ago.

"Broadcast what I have to say," he told a forum in remarks that were carried on the Internet. "What I say is not even accurately published in the press."

His surprise comes as a surprise. For this master politician, retirement seems to have been a refresher course in elementary principles of government — that the man and the office are not the same, that self-interest is the politician's compass and that yes-men do not always mean it when they say yes.

For more than a year, Mahathir, 80, has been grumbling about his handpicked successor, Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi, who has been reversing some of his policies and canceling some of the gigantic projects that were his legacy.

In the past few weeks, the familiar aggressive, sharp-tongued Mahathir has returned noisily to the scene. But although the man may sound the same, his words have an entirely different ring, coming not as edicts but simply, for the government, as a nuisance.

It is not a benign nuisance, and some analysts worry that if Mahathir persists he could cause political rifts and shake the stability that is a hallmark of the government he left behind. So far, Abdullah's position seems secure, and leaders of the governing party, the United Malays National Organization, or UMNO, are seeking to mediate between the two men.

But many analysts here see Mahathir's attacks as an expression more of personal angst than of differences in policy.

One of his past allies, the former

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deputy prime minister Musa Hitam, suggested dismissively that he was suffering from "post-prime ministerial syndrome."

There is poignancy in Mahathir's realization that the country has been moving on without him. Although his announced plan was to become "the man in the library" writing his memoirs, it is clear that he did not expect to become so quickly irrelevant.

"I get stabbed in the back, I don't know which direction it comes," he complained to the political Web site www.malaysiakini.com. His chief reference was to Abdullah, who he said had broken a promise to continue his policies and complete his projects.

Among the issues Mahathir has raised are Abdullah's decision to scrap expensive plans for work on a new bridge to Singapore; his downgrading of the special status of the national car, the Proton; and the firing of the carmaker's chief executive, a friend of the former prime minister.

"I'm in the habit of choosing the wrong people," Mahathir said. "I chose him and I expect a degree of gratefulness."

Another of his chosen people, Anwar Ibrahim, who was Abdullah's predecessor as heir apparent, was fired in 1998 when he appeared to be mounting a challenge to the prime minister. He was then convicted and jailed on what almost everyone here believes were politically motivated charges of corruption and sodomy.

Once Mahathir was out of power, those convictions were overturned, and Anwar has filed defamation charges that are likely to prolong the pain for the former prime minister.

Abdullah has offered a contrast in styles, with a low-key response to Mahathir that is making some of his supporters impatient but is being characterized as "elegant" by the newspapers that are now his to command.

"I have more important things to do, like repaying the trust given to me by the people," he said in one of his few responses.

This evidently infuriated Mahathir, who seemed to be attempting to goad Abdullah when he told a conference:

"Now I don't know who is in power. If you ask a question, he does not answer. Others will answer."

Some of those others were members of his own cabinet, endorsing his projects and agreeing with his ideas, and the shift in their allegiance has clearly wounded him.

"Before, I also got such support," he said. "Many kissed my hands. But now I know this support has no quality. I thought they supported me because of what I was doing for the country. Now I know they supported me because I was prime minister."

With the fury of a former prime minister scorned, he added: "They are like a chorus line. They are all dancing. When one kicks, all will kick. They are like the Rockettes."

As if to underscore his indifference, Abdullah headed to Australia for a vacation last week after his cabinet minis-

'What I say is not even accurately published in the press.'

ters pledged to continue speaking out for him.

"All the ministers must defend their position," said Nazri Aziz, the minister in charge of law. "These are cabinet positions and now they are being disputed."

It was Nazri who suggested a week ago that Mahathir resign from the ruling party, adding, "Most of us don't understand him any more."

Steven Gan, the editor in chief of Malaysiakini, said that Mahathir had not changed so very much, telling him during their interview that he had never liked the upstart Web site and still did not like it.

He said that the former prime minister should not have been surprised at the turn the country has taken.

"I think his ego overshadowed his critical analysis," Gan said. "I would have thought that if he had read Malaysiakini over the past years he would have been able to realize that things were not what they seemed."