

It is characteristic of the Malays that having once placed their trust and respect in a person, they are loath to revise their opinions even under altered circumstances. Thus, it is no longer their convictions that count but those of Dato Onn. - C.H.E. Det aka Mahathir Mohamad (1950) "New thoughts on nationality", *Sunday Times*, April 9. As quoted in the book *Beyond Mahathir* (2003) by Khoo Boo Teik.

Comment by P. Gunasegaram

THAT was more than half a century ago - he was a mere 25 then. Is former prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad counting on that kind of thinking among Malays when it comes to him, as he mounts a fierce and relentless campaign against Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi? Or will a similar fate befall him as happened to Datuk Onn Jaffar?

Umno founder Onn Jaffar gave up his power and could not get it back. Onn, former prime minister Tun Hussein Onn's father and Umno's first president when the party was formed in 1946, left Umno in 1951 when the party did not accept his proposal to open the membership to all Malaysians and rename it the United Malayan National Organisation. Two other parties he formed failed to get Malay support.

When you are in the seat of power - especially when that perch gives you lots of it - you are invincible. But when you no longer have that power, you are no longer invincible. You have to get the power back before you become invincible again.

Can Mahathir, against all the

The myth of Mahathir's invincibility

The Sun - 2/8/2003

odds, get the power back when someone else holds it and is not about to give it up? Especially when his successor, whom he picked, led Umno and Barisan Nasional to the most resounding victory ever in the general elections of 2004. That victory, the scale of which may not have been possible if Mahathir was at the helm, represented a return to the fold of Malays who had deserted Umno in 1999, post the Anwar Ibrahim crisis.

That we have to actually ask and answer this question indicates in no uncertain terms that the silly season in Malaysian politics is back when the unthinkable is thought and an increasing weight of opinion seems to think that the impossible is possible. Or is this merely another form of spin-doctoring from the other side?

The unfortunate thing is that a whole lot of ill and ailments that will supposedly affect the country is conjured up by the doom and gloom sayers, who create a momentum of pessimism by inviting and even

coercing others to their point of view by their incessant prattle.

The Malays and Umno will be split again, there will be political instability, this is the worst crisis Abdullah has faced, economic development will grind to a halt, the stock market will fall, don't underestimate him, etc. Are all these justified?

Let's look at the facts. Mahathir was elected MP for the Kota Setar Selatan seat in Kedah in 1964. It was established early on that he was not invincible when he lost the seat to PAS's Haji Yusuff Rawa in 1969. According to some accounts, he had said in 1969 that he did not need Chinese votes to win. Following the May 13, 1969 riots, Mahathir wrote a widely circulated letter criticising then prime minister Tunku Abdul Rahman. He was dismissed from his Umno Supreme Council position and expelled from the party. The following year, he wrote the controversial book *The Malay Dilemma* which was promptly banned, the ban being lifted in 1981 when Mahathir became prime minister.

Mahathir was readmitted into Umno in 1972 after Tun Abdul Razak assumed the mantle. The Tunku had stepped down after the 1969 riots. Mahathir stood for the Kubang Pasu parliamentary seat in 1974 and won unopposed, retaining the seat until 2004 when he did not contest after his retirement. He was appointed education minister in 1975.

The vital turning point for Mahathir came the following year when Tun Hussein Onn became prime minister following Razak's untimely death. Despite the somewhat scathing remark that Mahathir made about his father 26 years ago, Hussein picked Mahathir as his deputy.

And this was NOT because Mahathir enjoyed overwhelming support in Umno. Mahathir was picked over two Umno vice-presidents who had higher votes than him, Ghafar Baba and Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah. An accident of fate put Mahathir in line for the top position.

When Hussein retired due to failing health, Mahathir became prime minister in 1981. In 1987 he just scraped through in a bruising battle for control of Umno against the Tengku Razaleigh-Musa Hitam coalition which became known as Team B.

This was followed by Mahathir consolidating his power, which included the formation of Umno Baru, excluding key Team B members,

changing the face of the judiciary and changing the rules of nomination, all of which he could do because of the powers of incumbency, both as Umno president and prime minister.

Despite the opposition of two former prime ministers, the Tunku and Hussein, Mahathir was able to hold on and won the 1990 election, although losing Kelantan, a clear indication that it is not easy to unseat an incumbent, especially when there is no alternative to the Barisan Nasional.

When Mahathir sacked his deputy Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim in September 1998, the power of incumbency helped him to stay in his seat. Despite the prediction of pundits, he managed to win the 1999 elections comfortably, although there was a loss of Malay votes.

Partly because of what Mahathir has done to strengthen the seat of the incumbent president of Umno, it is not going to be easy to unseat Abdullah. On top



of this there are considerable powers that the prime minister has under the laws of the country.

Of course these do not mean that we advocate restraining Mahathir or silencing him. No! He and anyone else must have this freedom. Let him crisis-cross the country, let him say what he wants, let the newspapers report it if they consider it newsworthy. He is entitled to take any measure within the law.

More than the danger of under-estimating is over-estimating his power and assuming that what he does will plunge this nation into the depths of social and economic upheaval. Really, there is no need for the government to react to his every move. Let him be and just get on with the job, and lord knows there's much to be done. Mahathir pointedly ignored two former prime ministers in his time.

Mahathir is too astute to mount a direct challenge to Abdullah. What he will do is to continue to agitate and to raise the same old issues he has time and time again - issues which have been answered enough times and over which no sane government will back down.

What he wants to do is to raise so much dissent on the ground - real or apparent - to try and force Abdullah to "voluntarily" step down, much like what happened to the Tunku. Abdullah will be falling into his trap if he does throw in the towel.

In Mahathir's mind, even if he fails to force Abdullah out, he is hoping to at least put on the defensive or neutralise those individuals close to Abdullah who he regards as unfriendly to him

(Mahathir).

Mahathir's time is up - it ended some three years ago when he gave up power. To try to hold onto it by using his image and influence to force things is regrettable and will backfire on him eventually. It is more than time to move on.

But we Malaysians have this habit of shooting ourselves in our feet oftentimes, blowing up larger than life political posturing into political crises instead of getting on with the matters that matter. Mahathir is counting on that.

Malaysia has weathered much worse than this and come out on top. Unless we make it happen, there is no political crisis. No one is indispensable, least of all Mahathir right now. And no one, not even Mahathir, is invincible. Ask Datuk Onn Jaffar.

P. Gunasegaram is group executive editor of *The Edge*.