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Going for broke?



IN THE NEWS: Dr Mahathir retired on a cloud of glory but is he now taking a terrible risk on his reputation as an elder statesman?

Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad continues to cause ripples with his comments and accusations about the Abdullah administration. Is there a limit to how far he will go? JOCELINE TAN reports.

THE Prime Minister's executive jet took off from the Subang military airbase at 6.30am.

It was a longish flight from Subang to Sandakan, Sabah, and the pair of political secretaries accompanying Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi were pleased to note that their boss was cheerful, even chatty, despite the early hour.

It was a day after the scathing critique by Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad and the newspapers stacked neatly on the folding table all had reports on the incident on their front pages.

"He did not seem affected at all," said Senator Datuk Wan Farid Wan Salleh, his political secretary in the Home Ministry.

In fact, he seemed a little bemused as he went through the papers.

Wan Farid, who studied law in Britain and who has read extensively about former British Premier Margaret Thatcher, talked about how Thatcher had also given her successor John Major a headache although he was a favourite of hers.

Wan Farid's remarks about how Thatcher had probably suffered "withdrawal symptoms" caused his listeners to burst into laughter.

"Honestly, my boss is not distracted by what's happening," said the Terengganu-born political aide.

In Sabah that afternoon, Abdullah's response to his predecessor was measured and gentlemanly.

The circle around Abdullah are mad as hell, but the man himself has shown remarkable self-control, his emotions barely discernible even though he must also be upset.

Who would not be after being so publicly judged and embarrassed?

"Tun Mahathir has gone overboard. If he is sincere, do it through the proper channels. Don't use the media to hit Pak Lah, it's very unfair to the PM," said Bera MP Datuk Ismail Sabri.

The media headlines of the former Prime Minister criticising his choice of successor have been riveting.

A Kedah Umno politician was so nervous after seeing the headlines that he only dared read the papers that evening.

Said political insider Datuk Annuar Zaini: "I feel more sorry for him than for Pak Lah. It's a situation that should not have happened. He does not need this after all he's done for the country. And I'm so fond of Tun Siti Hasmah, she is so motherly towards me.

"I think most people want this to stop. People have called me, scolding me. They said, you are the Bernama chairman, can't you do something?"

Those in Wanita Umno are even more concerned.

"We don't want Tun Mahathir to become like the former prime ministers. We still have feelings for him. We want to hear his views but not like this, fighting in the media," said Cheras Wanita Umno head Datuk Faridah Abu Hassan.

Dr Mahathir has been on a head-on collision course with his successor and the Government and his party too, given the way Cabinet members and Umno leaders have rallied behind Abdullah.

He has been deeply unhappy about a variety of issues — beginning with the national car policy and climaxing with the cancellation of the bridge project in Johor.

And although he has not said it, those close to him suggest that another sore point was that Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz is still in the Cabinet.

The bridge issue was the proverbial last straw and his feelings about the bridge and Singapore have to be seen in the context of his early history as an ultra-Malay and nationalist.

Since then, he has upped the ante and his remarks on Wednesday seemed to suggest that he was going for broke.

"It is not about unseating Pak Lah because it is basically a one-man crusade. It has more to do with a perceived accumulation of

hurts, frustration and inability to influence events and policies he feels strongly about," said an analyst.

Suggestions of mismanagement, overspending and inefficiencies have also upset him and he takes it as a personal critique about his era.

"I heard he was extremely annoyed over a report insinuating his role in the IPP (independent power producers) policy and he felt that the electricity tariff hike was being pinned on him," said the analyst.

The general opinion now is that Dr Mahathir has the right to air his views but opinions are divided about the way he has gone about it.

"We cannot have a former PM fighting a present PM," said Ismail.

Even those loyal to him are starting to feel uncomfortable because he is reminiscent of the political opposition.

Those not with him are upset, even furious, that he is doing this to Abdullah.

They think that what Dr Mahathir is doing amounts to an attempt to destabilise the top leadership.

But the question of instability, said a senior Cabinet member, does not arise because of Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak's commitment to the Abdullah administration.

"This is politics and there will be people who will instigate him but the DPM will not be shaken. He understands the situation and he knows what to do. He's very clear about the implications of his position," said Razak Baginda, head of a think tank linked to Najib.

Dr Mahathir is taking a terrible risk on his reputation as an elder statesman.

He retired on a cloud of glory, venerated as a statesman and visionary, with parallels drawn to leaders like Lee Kuan Yew and Thatcher.

That he retired at his own pace meant that people were prepared to overlook the glitch-

es in his administration.

"What he's doing now is as good as inviting people to re-examine his record in the cold light of day. His era was one of great achievements but they were not without blemishes," said the analyst.

Dr Mahathir knows there are groups who are critical about what is happening now that the honeymoon for the Abdullah administration is over.

His views are eagerly absorbed and dissected by the educated, urban middle-class.

And in any issue, there is always the silent majority.

But Johor Baru MP Datuk Shahrir Samad asks if it is wise to pander to these groups if he wants to remain a statesman.

"If he wants that sort of input, then choose the Singapore formula of a senior minister or be more discreet and less confrontational. The fact that he is Dr Mahathir and talking so publicly in this way, it makes people suspicious of his motive. I'm not asking him to be quiet but discretion is more effective in this case," said Shahrir.

After 22 years under Dr Mahathir, it should be clear by now that he has an iron will, an immense ego and an enviable intellect. One does not tell a man like him what to do or not to do.

So, if he has indeed burnt his bridges with Abdullah, to what extent is he prepared to take his cause? Is there a limit to where Dr Mahathir is heading?

Said his eldest son Datuk Mokhzani Mahathir: "He is a fighter and I'm afraid I don't see him backing down. Even Cabinet ministers have asked me what it is that my father wants. I guess he will be that check-and-balance, whether people like it or not.

"My father is 81, he feels he does not have much time left. He just wants what he has dreamt of to be achieved. He's responding because he sees his lifetime of work eroding."