

Funny, familiar, forgotten feelings

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A troubled horizon looms ahead for Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad even as the government prepares to answer in full his queries on issues that have made him such an angry man of late, writes JOCELINE TAN

TUN Dr Mahathir Mohamad arrived in grand style, stepping out of a gleaming black Mercedes onto the red carpet at a hotel in Petaling Jaya.

He was the VIP guest at a Universiti Utara Malaysia dialogue and as the former Premier shook hands with the long line of undergraduates, he caught sight of reporters who had turned up for the event.

The press was hot on his heels again but he merely raised an eyebrow and continued his way down the red carpet, looking rather suave in his dark suit worn over an open-necked maroon shirt.

He smiled ever so charmingly all the way into the hall, with former First Lady Tun Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali by his side.

And as he sat on stage with one leg elegantly crossed over the other, he seemed oblivious to the political storm he had whipped up the past week.

So much has happened that it is hard to believe that it has been little more than a week since Dr Mahathir blasted his way into the headlines with what many thought was a below the belt remark that Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi had not been his first choice of successor.

Said an Umno Youth politician: "It was as though Mount Merapi had erupted on this side of the strait."

For many politicians, it has been one of those long weeks in politics.

"Actually, it has been a very troubling week. It's not been good for anyone," said a political aide to a minister.

Things have toned down a little since the Prime Minister said that the government would answer all the queries raised by Dr Mahathir.

The administration is now busy preparing the explanation to four key questions: the cancellation of the second bridge in Johor, the issuance of APs (particularly to two individuals who do not sell cars), the sale of MV Agusta Motors and the non-renewal of the contract of Proton Holdings CEO Tan Sri Tengku Mahaleel Tengku Ariff.

Abdullah revealed this to Umno MPs and senators at a closed-door meeting in Putrajaya earlier this week.

The answers will be thorough and detailed and certain documents may even be declassified. All this will take some time to prepare but when ready, they will be made public rather than directly to Dr Mahathir.

(On Friday, Proton set the ball rolling by responding direct to Dr Mahathir on the last two issues from the company's perspective.)

The Prime Minister's meeting with the Umno members of the two houses of Parliament went remarkably well.

Abdullah's earthy, non-showy style has always worked well at this sort of smaller meetings.

Datuk Alwi Che Ahmad, the Ketereh MP from Kelantan, had gone in feeling rather combative, telling his colleagues with typical Kelantan-style gungho that he was going to ask the Prime Minister some difficult questions.

But he said Abdullah spoke with such sincerity that he was swayed.

"I felt he really spoke from his heart ... no sign of anger or frustration, there was so much patience, like a good Muslim. By the time he finished, my heart felt so soft. I believe he really wants the government to explain the issues," said Alwi.

Abdullah did not stoke the fires nor did he use the occasion to lobby his MPs and senators for support.

In fact, he told them that he did not even know what his deputy Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak was going to say until he read it in the



SMELLING GOOD: Despite the long and troubled week, it was business as usual for the Prime Minister who spent a full day inspecting green projects in Selangor. — STARpic by K.K. SHAM

papers although Najib had telephoned from India to tell him that he was making a statement.

"I did not ask him what he would say but told him, thank you very much," he told his audience.

He also told them that as long as his deputy was with him, "it's going to be fine."

"I'm not going to pretend that I am not Pak Lah's man. I like his style. At meetings he listens and allows people to talk. So I'm not sur-

prised he has decided to be open by allowing these questions to be answered," said Terengganu Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Idris Jusoh.

But the question being asked now is whether the government revelations will satisfy Dr Mahathir.

"Tun is a clinical, methodological and thorough man. The answers must satisfy him even if they are directed at the rakyat and even if it will implicate his administration, so

be it," said the above political aide.

In fact, many wonder whether the revelations may also damage Dr Mahathir and those around him.

Every administration has its skeletons, and the Mahathir administration because of its 22-year duration probably has more than its share of scandalous bones.

Will people fall on their own swords? And will the revelations, as they say, open up a can of worms?

"I'm quite sure the answers will hurt a number of people because I heard that nothing will be held back," said an Umno Senator.

Dr Mahathir has a lot to worry about if Putrajaya goes by the book.

The levers of power are now being pulled by the incumbent even if what Dr Mahathir is saying finds credence among people whether inside or outside Umno.

According to an analyst, people are pleased to see these issues being debated and argued. They see it as part of the process towards a more open way of doing things in the government.

"Dr Mahathir thinks he is protecting his legacy. But on closer scrutiny, many aspects of his legacy are double-edged and he may be the one most damaged. My gut feeling is that Dr Mahathir may come off far less statesmanlike. That's the problem of throwing yourself back into the fray again," said the analyst.

Others think the spillover may also affect those in the portfolios handling the issues concerned.

"I'm sure there are people having mental cold sweats," said the analyst.

As it is, bits and pieces of the previous administration's record on the judiciary have been played out in the mainstream media.

The retrial of Sukma Darmawan Sasmitaat Madja is yet another point of worry. The Court of Appeal has ordered a new trial of Sukma over charges of sodomy with Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

Sukma, the adopted brother of Anwar, was recharged in the Sessions Court on Thursday.

He has grown older, his boyish sweetness, or what the Malays call "jambu", has given way to more manly good looks and it is possible that he dreads the retrial as much as some Malaysians, even if it may clear his name.

The first trial cleaved national politics and shook up Umno. Will the new trial dredge up all those funny, familiar, forgotten feelings?

Some of Dr Mahathir's most damaging allegations against his former deputy are bound to be called into question again.

There is now a lull before yet another storm, but Johor Baru MP Datuk Shahrir Samad insisted there is no crisis.

"These are interesting times but there is no crisis. The fear of a crisis developing is there because crises were a trademark of Dr Mahathir but this time, there has been no breakdown in authority or splits in the party," said Shahrir, noted for his record of standing up to Dr Mahathir even at the height of the latter's power.

Despite all the conspiracies flying about, what Dr Mahathir is doing is not about grabbing power or making a comeback.

But he is used to having his way and he is smoking like an active volcano over what he sees as a reversal of the policies of his time.

But problems loom in the horizon for the former Premier.

The trouble is that Dr Mahathir's world was also for a long time the world of many who are still part of the present administration.

Can his world collapse without damaging some of them as well?