

SOME have called it smoking the peace pipe, except that the Prime Minister and Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad do not smoke.

And it is definitely not going to turn into golf diplomacy because golf has never been the game of the former premier.

As such, the face-to-face between Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and Dr Mahathir will simply have to be described as a meeting but it is already known as the "meeting of the year" as far as Umno members are concerned.

That is how much weight the Umno fraternity has placed on the talks.

They are not expecting the hostilities of the past months to evaporate overnight, but they are just glad the two are finally talking.

"It will cool down the situation and clear the air. I feel very positive about it," said Datuk Sharkar Shamsuddin, who is Pahang Umno information head.

For more than a month now, the air has been filled with talk that a meeting was on the cards.

But party secretary-general and Home Minister Datuk Seri Radzi Sheikh Ahmad would just smile his mysterious Mona Lisa smile whenever anyone asked him.

Even fellow Cabinet colleague Datuk Zainuddin Maidin could not coax anything out of Radzi.

"He just smiled, refused to say yes or no," Zainuddin recalled.

Apparently, only a small group has been privy to the arrangements.

Not long after the first stillborn attempt at a meeting, the association of former *wakil rakyat* or Mubarak mooted a second meeting and there was a string of highly discreet to-and-fros between them and Radzi.

The Mubarak group struck a chord with both sides because they were seen as the group with the least vested interest: they did not harbour ulterior ambitions and would not take advantage of the situation.

As such, they had the moral push that other well-wishers lacked.

But the key Mubarak personality in this particular affair also happens to be one of the most well-regarded veteran figures in Umno, namely Tan Sri Azahari Taib, 83, from Kedah.

The octogenarian, just a year older than Dr Mahathir, was decidedly coy when asked about his role in facilitating the meeting.

"You are talking about the lion and the tiger. I am a nobody, just a small fry around them," he said in his typical jocular way.

But this "small fry" goes back a long way with Dr Mahathir as well as Abdullah.

The small-sized and sprightly Azahari was a contemporary of the Prime Minister's late father and sometimes still refers to Abdullah as "the young fellow".

He has known Dr Mahathir since they were teenagers or, as he put it, "since the Japanese Occupation."

He knew Mahathir by his nickname, 'Det', but after the latter graduated as a medical doctor, Azahari took to calling him "Doctorr," often rolling the "r" in the title.

Both Azahari and Radzi were the main facilitators at the stage of getting the nod from both men.

Once they got the nod, the arrangements went to a new level that also saw the two sons of the two men helping to work out the nitty-gritty of their fathers' schedules.

Also, little known to everyone, Dr Mahathir had actually agreed to the meeting even before the outcome of the Kubang Pasu affair.

His second son Mokhzani was asked to go to Kedah to talk to his father. Apparently, Dr Mahathir said, "okay," with quite little persuasion.

An incredible amount of effort has gone into arranging this seemingly straightforward meeting.

If anything, it shows how determined people in Umno and the Government are about resolving the fallout.

They think it has gone on too long.

Although Dr Mahathir's quarrel with Abdullah began in June this year, his critique of the administration began last year over the AP issue and the national automotive policy.

His supporters insist he only wants to see the issues addressed and resolved but his attacks have, at times, been so personal that they left some gasping.

"It's been so unsettling for us and that's not only because I come from the same state as Tun Mahathir. We look up to both men and we hope they won't only shake hands but also come to terms with each other," said Puteri Umno treasurer Suraya Yaakob.

Despite all the criticism, said think-tank head Razak Baginda, Abdullah has held on.

Dr Mahathir, on the other hand, has come a full circle.

"It would be tempting to say he is mellowing but the point is Dr Mahathir has not seen the sort of support he expected. He has taken

All ready for 'meeting of the year'

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his cause to different groups. There has been support but it has been nebulous rather than concrete. To stay relevant he has to come to the table," said Razak.

It has been a long, terrible year for both men and more so for Abdullah because he was the main target.

As such his willingness to meet with Dr Mahathir is to be commended.

Not many people, as Umno supreme council member Datuk Shahrir Samad pointed out, would want to do that after the things said.

"It says a lot of the nature of Pak Lah," said Shahrir.

Abdullah, sources said, is genuinely pleased about the face-to-face plan.

He has been deeply troubled and hurt by the attacks and from no less than an iconic personality like Dr Mahathir. He dislikes the conflict and the tension and he wants to see a more stable political atmosphere in order to implement his policies.

"When Umno is not stable, it affects everybody," said Zainuddin.

And although many welcomed the meeting, expectations about its outcome have ranged from optimism to scepticism.

The more optimistic hope it will establish a direct line of communication between the two men so that they need not air their views in public.

Dr Mahathir's end also has to accept that the issues raised cannot be resolved in one meeting.

"It will take more effort and commitment than that. The two parties should work things out from there. Pak Lah should not think that it will lessen his position as the Prime Minister and Tun should not think it will curb his opportunity to be heard," said a source close to

the former premier.

Shahrir put it more bluntly: "You cannot go in expecting the PM to agree with everything. That's not going to happen."

Whichever way one may chose to view the meeting, it is a truce of sorts.

And like all truces, there has to be a ceasefire. The humiliating public attacks ought to stop.

"Tun Mahathir could have joined forces in advising the Government but he went and did it from the outer lane. I hope he will return to the inner lane," said Razak.

Abdullah's administration needs to reciprocate where possible.

It is possible that some of the administration's advisors misjudged Dr Mahathir's deep sense of interest, involvement or even possessiveness over the state of affairs in the country and, more important, the extent to which he was prepared to go to defend his ideas.

Those who worked with him would have understood it well enough and it came out rather clearly in his recent interview on Bloomberg.

When the interviewer described Proton as his baby, Dr Mahathir, with a whad'yamean-kind-of-smile, interjected: "Everything in this country is like my baby after 22 years."

Said political insider Datuk Annuar Zaini: "For now, it's really between the two. I'm praying for the best because I represent the group who wants to see friendship between them. It's not impossible - they are breathing the same air, standing on the same soil and in the same party."

As crucial as the meeting is, it is what happens afterwards that is going to be more