

Euphoria of hope fizzles out

The meeting had begun on a cloud of hope and good wishes but relations between Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad and the Prime Minister seem to have slid back to square one or worse, writes JOCELINE TAN.

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TUN Dr Mahathir Mohamad's gleaming black Mercedes-Benz glided out of the Prime Minister's official residence a little after 5pm.

Dr Mahathir had arrived and left on the dot, leaving the media who had been milling about since early afternoon empty-handed.

As such, it was a very hungry media, desperate for news about the highly anticipated meeting between Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and Dr Mahathir, that decided to head for his Mines Resort City home about 20 minutes drive from Putrajaya.

They got through the security at the gate with surprisingly little fuss and even managed to park their cars near the porch, next to a posh Bentley.

They were even more surprised when the former premier agreed to see them although he was due at his eldest son Datuk Mirzan's house for *buka puasa*.

It had been a long day and his voice was soft and a little hoarse but he answered most of their queries. It was not a very long interview and reporters were still popping questions as his other two sons Datuk Mokhzani and Datuk Mukhriz ushered him to the car after about 30 minutes.

But what an impact it made when aired over primetime news that night on the main TV channels.

It was not only what he said but the way he said it that suggested the meeting had not had the desired consequence, at least as far as Dr Mahathir was concerned.

Bera MP Datuk Ismail Sabri remembered feeling rather stunned on hearing the news.

"When they agreed to meet we thought, good, they really want to settle the whole thing. But after the meeting he is still attacking Pak Lah. I'm really disappointed, I think my friends in Umno feel the same," said Ismail.

The following day, Dr Mahathir held a packed press conference in the inner courtyard of his house where, responding to questions, he elaborated on what he said the day before plus a few well-aimed opinion statements.

By then, it was crystal clear that the meeting had not changed his stance about anything. He seemed no less frustrated about the issues he had been talking about nor did he seem anywhere close to appeasement.

Dr Mahathir was still on the warpath. Dr Mahathir's second son, Mokhzani, has made a loyal effort to defend his father in the face of criticism.

"My father saw the meeting as an opportunity to state the facts without adulteration. What he said on Monday was what he said during the meeting. It's not fair to say that Tun has renewed his attacks on Pak Lah," said Mokhzani.

But the point is that Dr Mahathir's indomitable spirit ruled the day and there was quite little that anyone, his sons included, could do to dilute his mood.

Some have been blunt, calling the meeting a flop, even a disaster.

Others remained optimistic, saying that, "Dr Mahathir will be Dr Mahathir," and that things could still work out between them.

But mostly, people felt let down by Dr Mahathir's tell-all about the meeting.

They thought it did not reflect the spirit in which the meeting was arranged, that the senior man had been too exacting, even disparaging. They felt the senior man could have exercised some restraint in the spirit of Ramadan and Aidilfitri.

Besides, as Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar pointed out, the underlying principle of a four-eyed meeting is confidentiality and discretion.

"There's been so much negative comment which I think is a great pity after what he has done for the country. It should not have come to this," said Syed Hamid for whom some of the issues raised by Dr Mahathir have struck close to home.

Also, the fact that Dr Mahathir had walked in with a tape recorder was hint of the lack of trust and confidence about how the meeting was going to turn out.

Many, especially Umno members, had hoped that Sunday's face-to-face would lead to further meetings.

But the prospect of another meeting seems rather remote, as things stand now.

The Prime Minister has described his predecessor's post-meeting criticism as "stronger doses of venom" and was clearly riled that Dr Mahathir had chosen to go public without waiting for his response.

Going by the point-blank manner with which he rebutted some of the offensives, it looks like Abdullah may have come to the end of his tether or, as his friend Tun Musa Hitam would say, the end of his elegant silence.

According to Youth and Sports Minister Datuk Azalina Othman Said: "No one likes to negotiate or budge under pressure. You can't have someone dictating to the sitting PM. He will listen but he can't do everything you say."

"That is not the way to deal with Pak Lah. He may seem soft but he's hard to budge when he believes he is on the right lane. Most of all, you've to remember he is a man of faith."

But more stunning was the statement by the Johor Sultan on the first day of Hari Raya. After prayers on

Tuesday, the Tuanku told those congregated that Dr Mahathir should not interfere in the government and asked Johoreans to rally behind Abdullah.

It was a brief but momentous royal remark. After all, the aborted Johor-Singapore bridge was a central issue in Dr Mahathir's offensive against the Abdullah administration.

Since then Dr Mahathir has stepped up the tempo, claiming that the police were harassing his family members and that there was a climate of fear in the country.

The former premier, an Umno official noted, is pushing the Government against the wall.

"Dr Mahathir wants things done his way and he will only rest if Pak Lah follows his instructions," said Umno supreme council member Datuk Shahrir Samad. He said there was no need debate Dr Mahathir, much less dance to his tune.

"However, the PM has to make sure that his policies are implemented and deliver on his promises. He has to think about the hopes of the people and the changes they expect him to make. He has to correct mis-

takes and do it fast.

"He also has to keep tabs on the mentris besar and ministers so that they carry out his policies of transparency, improving human capital, public delivery system and so on. If they don't perform, he has to change them. The faster he gets his team going in the right direction the better.

"I'm glad he's beginning to use and involve the Umno political bureaus. Issues involving his family also have to be addressed. I believe he has the courage to act on complaints about his family and to draw the line between family and Government. That will win him immense respect and boost his image," said Shahrir.

The point that Shahrir, who is also Johor Baru MP, is trying to make is that the endurance of Abdullah's administration does not depend on submitting to all of Dr Mahathir's demands but it lies in fulfilling the people's expectations.

"Ultimately, what's important is how successful we are in addressing the demands and dissatisfactions of our constituency. When the constituents are contented, Dr Mahathir's attacks will grow irrelevant," said Shahrir.

But what now between the present and the ex-prime minister?

The Mubarak group that mooted last week's meeting has not abandoned hope of bringing them together again despite the bitter exchange of words.

"We are not giving up so easily, we want to organise more meetings. But we appeal to Dr Mahathir to be less confrontational. Some of the issues take time to resolve and he should give some time to the PM," said Kelantan Mubarak head Datuk Rozali Isohak.