

Opposition now instant fans of former prime minister

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WHEN Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad gave his now infamous talk on Saturday lambasting the government, opposition leaders filled the front rows of the audience.

They included Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS) top guns — deputy president Nasharuddin Mat Isa, youth chief Salahuddin Ayob and vice-president Husam Musa.

That night, the private TV3 station aired footage of Tun Dr Mahathir mingling with them, hinting naughtily at an unholy tango between the former premier and the opposition who once labelled him a pharaoh for his mega projects.

This, however, was almost the only coverage of Tun Dr Mahathir's latest diatribe in the local media yesterday.

His two-hour talk, during which he was dismissive of his handpicked successor, Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi, and mocking of his former Cabinet colleagues, was almost entirely ignored by local newspapers.

The mass-selling Malay newspapers and the independent-minded Chinese news-

papers did not carry any mention of it. Neither did the New Straits Times.

There was a short report in an early edition of The Star newspaper, which gave a general idea of the tone of the dialogue but left out the details.

There has also been no comment, so far, from Datuk Seri Abdullah or other leaders.

Instead, the newspapers focused on the Prime Minister's speech at the Malaysian Indian Congress' assembly on Saturday, which called on Barisan Nasional component parties to transcend communal interests to realise Malaysia's goal to become a developed country by 2020.

It was perhaps a signal that the government has decided to focus on the country's development and would not be distracted by the former premier's angry attacks.

The media blackout was, as some say, reminiscent of how the country's first prime minister Tunku Abdul Rahman was treated after he became one of Tun Dr Mahathir's fiercest critics in the 1980s.

But unlike the 1980s, the Internet has become a major means of communication, and it helped Tun DR Mahathir's diatribe become the talk of town soon after the event end-

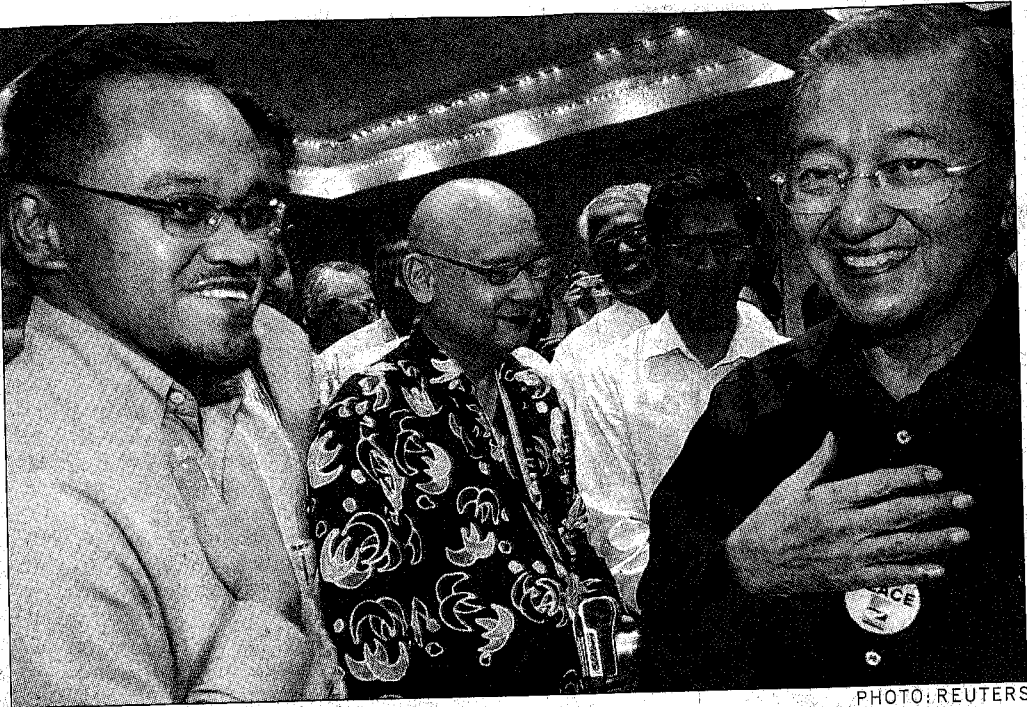


PHOTO: REUTERS

FOES TO FRIENDS?: Tun Dr Mahathir mingling with PAS top guns on Saturday, among them deputy president Nasharuddin Mat Isa (left). But Tun Dr Mahathir has insisted he speaks only for himself.

ed at lunchtime on Saturday.

By that evening, a video of the talk was uploaded on the website of Malaysia Today, which hosted the function. Various accounts and photographs were carried in other news websites such as Agenda Daily and Malaysiakini, and private blogs.

As much as the content of his attacks, his dalliance with the opposition was also a talking point.

The irony became even more pronounced when the former premier spoke in homely colloquial Malay, giving the talk an uncanny veneer of an opposition *ceramah*, or rally.

But it is unlikely that Tun Dr Mahathir will become an opposition ally — he has no love for them, and insisted on Saturday that he speaks only for himself.

But to the opposition, his

intimate knowledge of the government and his outbursts are a rich source of ammunition against the current administration.

"We welcome any prominent personalities questioning the government," the opposition Democratic Action Party leader, Mr Lim Guan Eng, was quoted as saying yesterday.

Tun Dr Mahathir can be more dangerous to the government than the opposition can ever be. More so than the attacks by opposition members; his words carry weight. He can shake delicate political alignments and raise doubts about the current administration.

His constant attacks are clearly being seen in the government circles as a bullying tactic.

One of his targets — NST editorial adviser Kalimullah

Hassan — wrote a thinly veiled article yesterday alluding to the attacks.

Datuk Kalimullah, who has been blamed by the former premier for the media blackout, wrote about dealing with bullies "who nudge you, goad you and are spoiling for a fight".

He told a story of a man who used wit to defeat bullies, and another who beat the bullies to pulp, although he did not say which he preferred.

By upping the ante on Saturday, Tun Dr Mahathir must have hoped to provoke a response from his successor and the latter's team.

But the media blackout and continuation of the government's policy of "elegant silence", as some have put it, will no doubt rile Tun Dr Mahathir further, prompting many to wonder what his next move will be.