

# Minister declares 'open war' on Mahathir

Malaysian government will no longer tolerate attacks by former PM, says Nazri Aziz

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A GOVERNMENT minister, declaring "open war" on Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad yesterday, said the Malaysian government would no longer tolerate attacks by the former premier.

"We go to war. He has declared a war against us," Datuk Seri Nazri Aziz, Minister in the Prime Minister's Department, told reporters at the Parliament building.

"For two or three months we kept quiet...we restrain ourselves. He took it as a weakness on our part and continued to attack us," he added. "We kept quiet hoping things will cool down."

Tun Dr Mahathir was not available for comment. An aide said that he was due to speak at an environment forum in Kuala Lumpur today.

Datuk Seri Nazri urged Tun Dr Mahathir to be a man and quit the ruling party if he cannot stop criticising his successor's administration.

"We cannot take this lying down. Out of respect for him we have kept quiet and not responded. He saw it as our weakness," he told the Associated Press.

Datuk Seri Nazri's words heightened the row between Tun Dr Mahathir and his chosen successor, Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi.

Tun Dr Mahathir's attacks on Datuk Seri Abdullah have raised the spectre of a divided ruling Umno party.

Datuk Seri Nazri told AP that he was speaking in his personal capacity, and did not consult the Prime Minister or Umno before going public.

Mr Nazri's comments to AP, which expanded on a news conference he gave earlier yesterday, reflected the growing frustration among many Umno members with Tun Dr Mahathir, who has a larger than life presence in the country and is venerated by most Malaysians.

"Now I'm still hesitant to oppose him because I still think of him as a former prime minister and former Umno president," Datuk Seri Nazri said at the news conference, which was held to answer Tun Dr Mahathir's latest criticisms made at an event here on Saturday which was also attended by many opposition leaders.

Datuk Seri Nazri said that Umno would not throw Tun Dr Mahathir out of the party, and instead accused the former premier of instigating suggestions that he would be asked to leave.

In the last few weeks, Tun Dr Mahathir has emerged as an unofficial one-man opposition, accusing Datuk Seri Abdullah of stabbing him in the back and mismanaging the administration.

Datuk Seri Nazri said that he was surprised the former prime minister was prepared to stoop to sit with the opposition members who had once branded him as a "pharaoh".

He claimed that Tun Dr Mahathir had reneged on all his promises to the government of the day and forgotten the advice that he had given other Umno leaders before retiring.

"Previously he asked (us) to follow the leader but when we support the government led by Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, he is angry," he said.

"If he continues to remain in the party, he would be like the opposition. It's better for him to be a jantan (man) and leave the party," said Datuk Seri Nazri. "It will be very good for the party. He might as well go out of the party and join an opposition (party)."

Tun Dr Mahathir, 80, appears to have been angered by several decisions taken by the Abdullah administration that reversed policies made during his 22-year rule, including the scrapping of several large infrastructure projects.

Datuk Seri Nazri said that Tun Dr Mahathir was breaking his promise not to interfere with the government after retirement.

The outspoken Datuk Seri Nazri said that Tun Dr Mahathir never tolerated any criticism when he was in power. Anybody who criticised him was sacked from Umno.

He said that Tun Dr Mahathir may be losing the goodwill of Malaysians and party members who had wept openly when he announced his decision to retire in October 2003.

"I don't think anybody will cry if he leaves the party today," he said. "I cannot read him."

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