



The Third-Party Poser

The rumour mill is in overdrive that a third party is trying to exert control over the government, causing a rift between our present and past premiers in the process. An Umno minister now says it is true. This does not augur well for the country.

WAS THERE an attempt to sack Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad from Umno, or, at the very least, to censure him as has been widely talked about?

That speculation became the staple of the Internet news sites, the weblogs and the coffee-shop pundits following Dr Mahathir's June 7 criticism of his successor, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

He went as far as saying that Abdullah was not his first choice and thought he had made a mistake.

The Opposition parties, in particular the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (Pas), were pretty much convinced that the Umno Supreme Council would give Dr Mahathir the boot.

Its Vice-President Husam Musa was widely quoted by the alternative Press and the Internet news sites as saying that he had received reliable information to that effect.

Thus, when the Umno Supreme Council, at its meeting on June 19 in Kuala Lumpur, made no such decision, Husam was quick to claim that his preemption had saved Dr Mahathir.

For such a claim to come from a Pas stalwart is not surprising. His concern for Dr Mahathir might not have been altruistic. Pas stands to benefit hugely from any split in Umno, as the 1998 sacking of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim has shown.

The sacking of Dr Mahathir by Abdullah, if it happens, would be a bonanza for the Opposition, in particular Pas, and, to a limited degree, Parti Keadilan Rakyat Malaysia and the Democratic Action Party.

Thus, the denial by several Umno personalities that there wasn't such a move did not help quash the rumours completely.

On the contrary, it strengthened the skeptics' view that the sword of Damocles may yet fall on Dr Mahathir's neck.

Accepting responsibility

FOR now, it would appear that the Supreme Council is

satisfied with ignoring Dr Mahathir and pledging its support for Abdullah.

The Prime Minister did what successive Umno Presidents had done when challenged – he reverted to the Supreme Council for support. It was not clear whether in this most recent case, it also included a pledge of loyalty.

In their attempts to portray an open-minded stance and dignity in the face of crisis, some Supreme Council members, including ministers, spoke of their deep respect for Dr Mahathir and his right to express his views.

But among Dr Mahathir's staunchest supporters, the denial served to reinforce their conviction that the danger was not over yet and that the 'deconstruction' of the former Prime Minister, especially by the government- and Umno-controlled media, would continue.

There are still people, in and outside Umno, who hold the view that the removal of Dr Mahathir at some point of time in the future is not a complete improbability.

Dr Mahathir's criticism of the government has been, even by the most liberal of yardsticks, stinging. To reveal publicly that Abdullah was not his first choice was harsh, to say the least.

But the very same argument, read in reverse, is Dr Mahathir's admission that he has made a mistake; firstly, in his assessment of who should have succeeded him, and secondly, for ignoring the fact that Datuk Seri Mohd Najib Abdul Razak was more senior than Abdullah, based on the results of the 1996 party election, the latest that the two men were involved in.

So, if a mistake has indeed been made, then Dr Mahathir must accept part of the blame, if not all. If he thinks that his policies and programmes are being progressively dismantled, he has himself to blame.

Consistent answers please

IN the eyes of Dr Mahathir's supporters and those who share his views, the government has not been effective in 'handling' his queries and criticism.

Abdullah's 'elegant silence' has not helped convince Dr Mahathir, his supporters and sympathisers that he is serious, or, worse, capable of answering the former Prime Minister's charges.

And on the rare occasion that he has tried to, he has appeared unsure. A typical example was when he was confronted by reporters from the Internet news sites recently. He was unsure which was more costly – cancelling the causeway project or proceeding with it.

The prevailing wisdom suggests that it would cost more to cancel the project than to proceed with it.

Herein lies another fundamental issue – the apparent inability of the government to come up with consistent and convincing arguments to put to rest Dr Mahathir's criticism once and for all.

After Dr Mahathir came out in the open with his criticism, Abdullah told the Press that he had instructed the relevant ministries to answer Dr Mahathir's charges.

He mentioned queries concerning the continued issuance of approved permits (APs), the cancellation of the causeway project, the sale of MV Agusta by Proton and the termination of the employment contract of Tengku Tan Sri Mahaleel Tengku Ariff, also by Proton.

The understanding is that either the ministers or the ministries concerned will respond. In the case of Proton, it should be the Minister of Finance or the ministry. This is because the Finance Ministry is the ultimate controlling shareholder of the national carmaker.

Instead, a strongly worded explanation was given by Proton's Chairman Datuk Mohd Azlan Hashim. This immediately contradicted the Prime Minister's statement that the relevant ministries would answer.

Of elegant silence and costly mistakes

WILL there still be an answer from the Finance Ministry? Or will other ministers and ministries too relegate and delegate the Prime Minister's order to their civil service subordinates?

Are we splitting hairs here?

When the Prime Minister said the relevant ministries would answer, did he mean the ministers responsible for these ministries, or written statements from these ministries would suffice?

Or as the Proton case has shown, does it mean that any Tom, Dick and Harry could answer on behalf of the ministers and ministries concerned?

Some see this as yet another example of Abdullah's inability to ensure that his instructions are carried out, which, in the wider context, is affecting the government's delivery system, while there are still others who say this could be a deliberate effort to de-politicise and hence shield him and his Cabinet from Dr Mahathir's attacks.

I think Dr Mahathir should acknowledge (maybe he has) the futility of trying to coax, encourage and provoke his 'elegantly silent' successor to respond to his queries and criticism. (Tun Musa Hitam, thank you for the refreshing creativity).

Here, I can't but be critical of Dr Mahathir's own stance in running Umno and managing the country. When he decided, as he did, to anoint Abdullah his successor instead of Najib, there surely must have been things about Abdullah that had attracted his attention.

He has known Abdullah for too long and too intimately to make a mistake, which he now thinks he has. Except for a brief period in the post-1987/88 political turmoil, Abdullah had been a member of his Cabinet all along.

As Foreign Minister for a good decade, he followed Dr Mahathir around the globe. He ran errands for Dr Mahathir on many issues and with many countries, including Singapore on the causeway and other key issues.

Misplaced faith?

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Surely, in making that heart-wrenching decision to opt for Abdullah as his successor, which in effect relegated Najib to the uncertain post of Deputy Prime Minister, Dr Mahathir must have had great confidence and faith in Abdullah.

The futuristic Mahathir Mohamad would not have gambled on anybody whom he thought would jeopardise his long-term plans, like Vision 2020, and his strategic projects like Proton and the construction of the half-bridge to replace the Malaysian side of the Causeway.

He must have been totally and unequivocally convinced that Abdullah was that man. And as an elder

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statesman and the man who had changed the economic and political landscape of the country, he must have thought that he would be accorded a level of respect befitting his stature.

With his massive power and influence, and the goodwill that he enjoyed, he could have 'installed' himself in one kind of advisory capacity or another. But he did not. Instead, he left it to his successor and his protégés.

They did. They made him advisor to Proton and Petronas. Then, almost immediately, in the case of Proton, they started to deconstruct his legacy and, to add insult to injury, he was reduced to dealing with the chairman of the company.

His position at Petronas looks more respectable largely because the national oil company is doing extremely well both at home and abroad, and is run by executives of unquestionable calibre, professionalism and dignity.

When a third party wants in ...

I would like to ask Najib – partly because I am told that he enjoys the Prime Minister's confidence and is at the helm of 22 Cabinet committees – why can't he intercede and suggest a solution to the standoff?

Since that exclusive interview I did with him for the now-defunct *Business Times* in 1977, I have always thought of Najib as a well-brought up, courteous and knowledgeable person.

Why can't he show greater deference to the old man who has always treated him like a son?

I don't think Dr Mahathir is demanding love and affection from anybody. This is a man who can live without love, except the love for his country. Damn him for all his shortcomings, but please show him respect where respect is due.

So, if Dr Mahathir was convinced that he was making the right decision in anointing Abdullah his successor and keeping his word by transferring the baton to him on Oct 31, 2003, what has then gone wrong?

In the Malay *wayang kulit* (shadow play) and *silat pulut* (the ceremonial rendition of the Malay art of self-defence) tradition, nobody really dares to speak up although the coffee shops, the grapevine and the corridors of power are replete with hushed talk of the real power behind the Prime Minister.

But that code of silence may be breaking down. A key Abdullah ally who goes back to their youth movement days, Rural and Regional Development Minister Datuk Seri Abdul Aziz Shamsuddin, has spoken about attempts

by a third party to control the present government.

In a report tucked away in the bottom corner of page six of the Bahasa Malaysia daily *Berita Harian* on June 21, Abdul Aziz, who was a long-time political secretary to Dr Mahathir, was quoted as saying that there was no animosity between Dr Mahathir and Abdullah. Instead, he claimed that the problem arose *kerana ada pihak ketiga cuba mengawal kerajaan sekarang* (because there is a third party that is trying to control the present government).

Abdul Aziz, according to the report, praised Abdullah

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'for not being easily influenced by (this) third party but instead continues to carry out the task entrusted to him.'

Berita Harian took pains to note that this was the first time that Abdul Aziz, as one of the people who had served Dr Mahathir for a very long time, had commented on the issue.

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Somebody of stature and authority like Abdul Aziz should come out with the identity of the group, failing which, public suspicion – rightly or wrongly – will continue to be focused on Deputy Umno Youth Chief Khairy Jamaluddin and his group of Oxbridge colleagues and media operators.

Dr Mahathir has avoided speaking about the Prime Minister's son-in-law but has, in a sarcastic manner, referred to Abdullah's associates who are now controlling and running the news media.

On a personal level, all this reminds me of the days and months following the death of Tun Abdul Razak Hussein in 1976 when the Umno old guards, led by the likes of the late Tan Sri Syed Jaafar Albar, aka the 'Lion of Umno', flushed out members of the so-called Razak's 'kitchen Cabinet'. **mb**

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