

Moaning Mahathir

BANGKOK

A sad case of post-prime-ministerial syndrome

THREE years have passed since Mahathir Mohamad stepped down, after governing Malaysia for 22 years. But the former prime minister is still finding it hard to adjust to retirement. After griping behind the scenes for the past year he has, in recent weeks, launched several fierce public attacks against Abdullah Badawi, the man he chose as his successor.

In Mr Mahathir's latest outburst, in a newspaper interview published on June 12th, he said "something has gone very wrong" in Mr Badawi's government. He hinted at corruption and implied it was under some sort of external control, without saying what that meant. He repeated his demands for answers to various questions he has raised, including the awarding of permits to sell imported cars to people he says are not in the car-dealing business.

Last month, Mr Mahathir accused his successor of selling out the country and of lacking "guts". This was after Mr Badawi scrapped his predecessor's plan to replace Malaysia's half of a causeway linking it to Singapore with an oddly-shaped half-bridge, which in turn followed failure to agree terms with Singapore for replacing the whole causeway. Mr Mahathir has also denounced changes made at Proton, a state-backed carmaker that was another pet project of his. Why was its motorcycle subsidiary sold to an Italian group for just €1, he demands to know. And why was Proton's boss sacked?

Mr Mahathir insists he is not trying to topple his successor. However, he now

publicly regrets choosing Mr Badawi. He says he should have picked Najib Razak, the deputy prime minister. So far, at least, Mr Najib and other leaders of the ruling United Malays National Organisation are rallying round Mr Badawi. Some accuse their former master of suffering from "post-prime-ministerial syndrome".

The mild-mannered Mr Badawi has reacted calmly, leaving his underlings to snap back. But if Mr Mahathir's attacks continue, he may be forced to lash out to avoid looking weak. Mr Badawi won a strong personal mandate in the 2004 general election but he lacks his predecessor's strong hold over the governing party. His

tough but sensible decision to cut fuel subsidies has cost him public support.

Mr Badawi's sin is not that he has deviated from the policies of the Mahathir era. Quite the opposite: it is his failure to go far enough. Little has been done to tackle the graft and cronyism that flourished under his predecessor. The national five-year plan that Mr Badawi announced with great fanfare on March 31st did not dismantle Malaysia's expensive and unsuccessful positive-discrimination scheme for ethnic Malays. And his promised reforms of the country's police have got nowhere, as shown by their brutal attack last month on a demonstration against fuel prices. ■