

Mark of Mahathir

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Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad appears to have given his blessing to the new Umno leadership line-up that is taking shape. But it has also sparked off talk of the return of Mahathirism, and not everyone is thrilled about it.



ANALYSIS
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UMNO politician Datuk Rauf Yusoh hosted quite an unrivalled Raya open house on Tuesday evening.

His guests of honour were Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Tun Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali. And flanking Dr Mahathir at the VIP table were Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak and International Trade and Industry Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin.

There were a string of other ministers including Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar (Home) and Datuk Seri Shafie Apdal (Unity, Culture, Arts and Heritage).

It was ostensibly a social event but the political undertones were just too glaring to ignore. And you could tell how fascinated the other guests were from the way they whipped out their handphones to record the scene.

Songbird Datuk Siti Nurhaliza and her husband Datuk K were also there but the star of the evening was Dr Mahathir.

There was a terrible crush to get near him as he prepared to leave. Not everyone managed to shake his hand but they gave him a round of applause when he finally climbed into his car.

Meanwhile, host Rauf who has the looks of a sumo wrestler was like a nervous schoolboy as Dr Mahathir held his hand and whispered a good three minutes of advice to him before he left.

But Rauf had pulled off something special, and that was to gather all these personalities under the same roof.

There was a very powerful message there. Some read it as Dr Mahathir giving his blessing to the incoming top echelon. The die-hard Umno types saw it as restoring the respect that this grand old man of Umno politics deserves.

And it meant something to them that he was there sitting at the same table with all these Umno leaders. They do not want Dr Mahathir to be at odds with the incoming Umno leadership.

Dr Mahathir is not the easiest of persons to live with – then and now, and especially if one is the Prime Minister – but Umno members want him back in the party.

“We want reconciliation. We want this man who has done so much for us to come home to Umno,” said Rauf.

He will be returning to Umno, maybe not right away but definitely after March.

Does this mean that Dr Mahathir has given up on Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah whom he had earlier endorsed for the president post?



Dr Latiff: Confident that Najib will know how to maintain a good relationship with Dr Mahathir.

Apparently, he was very disappointed – and suspicious – to learn that the Gua Musang MP had recently met top Pakatan Rakyat partners, including Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

The whole idea of backing Tengku Razaleigh was to force out Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. But Anwar is even more of an anathema to him than Abdullah, and Dr Mahathir's cooperation with the Kelantan prince has since come to an abrupt end.

Matter of history

But Tengku Razaleigh's campaign was a lost cause from the start. He is an extremely accomplished man, intelligent and so polished, but unfortunately his time in Umno has long passed.

Besides, there is the matter of his history. After the courts declared Umno illegal in 1987, he set up his own party, joined forces with PAS in two general elections and was instrumental in PAS winning Kelantan in 1990.

As such, it is less about Umno leaders blocking him than Umno members being unable to come to terms with his past. This is his third attempt at the Umno presidency. He



Razaleigh: His problem has less to do with Umno leaders blocking him than members being unable to come to terms with his past.

almost won the first time but he is likely to have a repeat performance of his 2004 attempt when he won only a single nomination from his own Gua Musang division.

And it has not helped that one of his aides had even begun instructing reporters to stop referring to Tengku Razaleigh by his decades-old nickname “Ku Li” because it was too casual and less than respectful.

But Tengku Razaleigh's name was proposed for nomination at a couple of division meetings in Johor. For instance in Batu Pahat, a member of the floor proposed him for president.

But it was quite futile because when Batu Pahat division chief and MP Datuk Dr Puad Zakarshi stood up to propose Najib and Muhyiddin for the two top posts, the gathering of more than 500 delegates responded with a standing ovation.

However, sanction from Dr Mahathir has its pros and cons.

There is already talk about the return of Mahathirism, a replay of the Mahathir era or even Dr Mahathir being the de facto Prime Minister, and not everyone is thrilled about it.

The man himself has described such speculation as “nonsense”.

Dr Mahathir will always be special, especially in Umno, and there will always be a role for him as an elder statesman, but his time, like Tengku Razaleigh's, has passed.

Najib and Muhyiddin are very seasoned leaders who have fought many battles. They know the political landscape has changed; the electorate have grown very demanding and their opponents more formidable than ever.

Time for change

When he was in Sabah recently, Najib said the old ways would have to go, that Umno would have to embrace change or the people would change the Government. Umno cannot return to another Mahathir-style era.

Besides, there is only one Mahathir, and Najib is anything but another Mahathir. He was a minister in Dr Mahathir's Cabinet but the two are from different generations and their backgrounds could not be more dissimilar. Najib has learnt from what Abdullah went through and he would want to keep Dr Mahathir engaged at a respectful distance rather than antagonise him.

He would also want to respect some of the reforms Abdullah has put in place as well as show regard for Dr Mahathir's better policies and legacies.

And he would definitely want to take heed of Dr Mahathir's criticism of nepotism and cronyism, particularly given that he has brothers who are in business and children who are entering or already in the job market.

Just recently, Najib was said to have been advised not to be saddled with another problematic set of “Level 4 boys” that some people in Umno have grown so wary of.

The term refers to the staff serving the Prime Minister's office, and Najib acted quickly to dispel concerns that another “Level 4” was about to take shape around him.

But these are still early days, the Umno division meetings are ongoing and Abdullah is still pressing on with his reforms.

Ultimately, Najib would want to put his own stamp on things and the picture should be clearer in the next few months.

“Datuk Seri Najib will be different from his predecessors because of his age, personality and upbringing. But I'm confident he will know how to have a good relationship with Tun Mahathir,” said Umno supreme council member Datuk Dr Latiff Ahmad.