

# A stifled leadership challenge in Malaysia points to continuing rifts in UMNO

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Elections for the top party positions in Malaysia's ruling United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) are due to take place on May 11. As in previous years, the results are a foregone conclusion. Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad and his deputy Abdullah Badawi will win the posts of party president and deputy president, in all likelihood completely unopposed.

One might therefore assume that Mahathir and Abdullah are in a rock solid position and that UMNO has reassumed its monolithic form following the expulsion of former deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim and his supporters in September 1998. But appearances can be deceptive. The unity of UMNO is not a product of complete support for the leadership at the grassroots but rather is enforced from above.

One of the signs of disgruntlement among UMNO members was a very tentative challenge mounted by Tenku Razaleigh Hamaz. Razaleigh did not officially announce a campaign. He let it be known that he would be available if nominated for either post, preferably it would seem, the deputy's. It was a campaign of nods and winks as a few commentators put it.

When asked by the press at one point if Razaleigh was campaigning, one of his aides replied that he had "no plans" to challenge for the top posts but that he "would not run away from responsibility". But behind the scenes, Razaleigh sent his supporters out to the party's divisions seeking nominations. As an UMNO divisional leader in the state of Sabah explained: "His aide spent weeks in our division, studying the ground and asking us to nominate him for either No. 1 or No. 2."

But Mahathir was not about to let any challenge, no matter how feeble, reach the floor of a party meeting. At his behest, UMNO's Supreme Council passed resolutions in January and February, that the two top party posts should be uncontested. Speaking for the resolution in February, Mahathir said it was necessary to close ranks around the existing leadership because party unity had been fragile since the national elections last November. Despite a

gerrymander in its favour, UMNO lost nearly 20 seats to opposition parties, particularly among its traditional Malay supporters in rural areas.

Moreover there are indications of wider disaffection. In an interview in *AsiaWeek* in February, opposition figure and sociologist Rustam Sani stated that UMNO had lost up to 80 percent of its support among students following the jailing of Anwar. He claimed that UMNO youth leaders were not able to campaign on the campuses in the November election because they were jeered off. After the poll UMNO Youth's assistant secretary Zulkifli Alwi commented: "The message is that the younger generation is not with UMNO."

There is no doubt that Mahathir cranked up the party machine to prevent Razaleigh from receiving the necessary nominations. As a member of the UMNO leadership he was bound by the council resolutions and so was unable to openly challenge. His only statement was an appeal for nominations to be voted on by secret ballot—a proposal that would have relieved some of the pressure on his supporters to fall into line with the Mahathir leadership.

By the end of March, Mahathir and Badawi had the nominations sewn up for president and deputy president in 134 out of the 165 UMNO divisions. According to the party rules, to be eligible to stand for these posts requires a minimum of 50 and 33 divisional nominations respectively. Ever since independence in 1957 those holding these posts have filled the positions of prime minister and deputy prime minister. The deputy's position has the added significance that it is the post of the heir apparent to the 73-year-old Mahathir.

Razaleigh was forced to bow out of the race for president, deputy president and also for the more junior post as one of the three vice-presidents, for which 17 nominations are required. One of Razaleigh's 17 nominations was ruled invalid by the UMNO supreme council on a technicality—it was not made by the Gua Musang division but the division's committee.

However, the fact that Razaleigh mounted a challenge at all after the UMNO leadership had effectively banned it

indicates that the discontent and tension within the ruling party runs deep. Razaleigh, who is a prince from the northern state of Kelantan, is a member of UMNO's inner circles and sits on the Supreme Council. In 1987 he almost toppled Mahathir from the top post in a bitter power struggle before splitting to form his own breakaway party. He was only admitted back into UMNO in 1996.

His challenge reflected concerns both within UMNO and the Malaysian ruling class over the political dangers ahead following the rift with Anwar and the growing signs of broader anti-government opposition. In his most overt statement, Razaleigh warned party leaders that UMNO would go the way of other formerly dominant political parties in the Asia if they did not heed the discontent in their own ranks. He cited as examples the humiliating reversals suffered by Taiwan's Kuomintang, Indonesia's Golkar Party, India's Congress Party and the Liberal Democratic Party in Japan. All of these lost office after dominating their respective national political landscapes for decades.

The split in UMNO was not a matter of personality differences. At the heart of the dispute were fundamental disagreements over the direction of economic policy in the response to the Asian economic crisis of 1997-1998. As finance minister Anwar was implementing the tough policies demanded by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which threatened to bankrupt major businesses including many closely connected to UMNO. In September 1998, Mahathir abruptly ordered an about face, imposed a series of currency and capital controls then sacked Anwar and had him expelled from UMNO.

Since then Mahathir has done everything possible to politically destroy Anwar and blacken his name through a series of trumped up charges. In April last year, Anwar was found guilty on charges of corruption and sentenced to six years jail. He is currently on trial for sodomy, which carries a 20-year sentence. Despite the obviously political nature of the case against Anwar, the judge ruled last week that Mahathir does not have to take the witness stand to face questioning over his role in the ouster of his deputy and the charges against him.

The relentless legal pursuit of Anwar is paralleled by other crude measures to crack down on all forms of opposition within Malaysia.

\* In January, the police charged five leading opposition figures with sedition, among them Karpal Singh, Anwar's lead defence lawyer. In an unprecedented move, Singh was charged as a result of remarks made in court while defending his client.

\* The government has moved to restrict *Harakah*, the party newspaper of the Islamic fundamentalist Parti Islam se-Malaysia (PAS), which has expanded its circulation

dramatically over the last two years. The sale of the newspaper is banned except to PAS members at the party's offices and the publishers have been ordered to reduce frequency from twice a week to twice a month. When the decision provoked protests in mosques in Kuala Lumpur, Deputy Police Commissioner Kamarruddi Ali announced an end to permits for street demonstrations in the capital.

\*At the end of March the government shut down the political magazine *Detik*, with a circulation of 80,000. According to a government spokesman, the ban had no political motive but was because the magazine used the wrong printer. Editor Ahmad Lutfi Othman commented: "We have criticised the government and now we're paying the price."

\* In the state of Malacca, the ruling UMNO-led alliance Barisan Nasional (BN) launched a purge of opposition supporters in state government departments and in organisations dependent on government funds. The state government terminated the contracts of 21 doctors and blacklisted 20 contractors. Large government accounts have been withdrawn from the Bank Islam Malaysia and the Bumiputra-Commerce Bank because they were suspected of being staffed by opposition members. In mid-March the government moved against lawyers.

Malacca's chief minister Datuk Wira Mohamed Ali Rustam declared that it was inappropriate for legal firms, which derived their income from government agencies and subsidiaries to be critical of the government. He said that the identification of opposition lawyers is "to serve as a warning to opposition party supporters that they have no place in Malacca." Both Mahathir and Badawi have expressed their support for this flagrant attack on democratic rights.

\* Last Saturday Malaysian authorities charged 16 of the 48 people detained over the April 15 opposition rally held to mark one year since the conviction of Anwar. They were charged with unlawfully attending an anti-government rally and released on bail. Each of them face up to one year in jail and fines of \$2,630. The 32 others were released after being held for a week in prison without charge.

The fact that the Mahathir government is only able to hold onto power through outright repression, the flouting of basic democratic rights, and the crudest of self-justifications is a measure not of its strength but of its weakness and fragility.



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