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Leaving Umno the Mahathir way: A crumbled trinity



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On 19 March 2008, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad dramatically announced that he was quitting Umno.

Some people were shocked while others felt betrayed that Mahathir would actually leave Umno. He'd joined the original version of the party way back in 1946. He was Life Member No. 1 in the new edition that he'd registered as Umno (Baru) in 1988.

Still others were relieved. They included some of the top Umno leaders who had been the targets of Mahathir's relentless criticisms over many things in the past two years. One can almost hear those people spit out a favoured Umno sneer at critics and dissidents, inside and outside the party: 'Good riddance to bad rubbish.'

Naturally Mahathir's move has been compared with Dato' Onn Jaafar's resignation as Umno President in 1951 as well as the refusal of Tunku Abdul Rahman and Tun Hussein Onn to join 'Mahathir's Umno' in 1988.

Thus would the superstitious have been encouraged to divine a curse that doomed every Umno president, save Tun Abdul Razak, to becoming Ex-Umno at some point because of an irreconcilable dispute – with the party in Onn's case, with the incumbent leader in the cases of Tunku, Hussein, and, now, Mahathir.

Lost trinity

Initial reactions to Mahathir's resignation were concerned with the likelihood of a stampede of Mahathir loyalists out of Umno. That hasn't happened. The most prominent member of the old Mahathir crew to leave was Tan Sri Sanusi Junid.

Later, observers wondered how Mahathir's move would affect the fortunes of Dato' Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and Umno, or the prospects of Dato' Seri Anwar Ibrahim and Pakatan Rakyat, or the plans of would-be party-hoppers in Barisan Nasional.

For the time being, thoughts along that direction must remain rather speculative.

We can be sure of this much, though. Mahathir's departure is the latest and clearest signal that the Umno-Mahathir-Abdullah trinity, hegemonic up to the general election of April 2004, has crumbled.

That trinity, which combined a dominant structure of power, an imposing ideological vision, and a smooth transition to the future, is now leaderless, party-less and clueless.

Party without a leader

How might one think of Umno as being leaderless?

It is so mainly because Abdullah's barely holding to his position as Umno President and Prime Minister.

A loose coalition of Umno figures has strenuously pressed for Abdullah's resignation, preferably via a clear plan of transfer of power before the Umno election in December. This coalition includes Umno leaders not selected to contest the general election, candidates who were defeated on 8 March, leaders fearful of their post-tsunami future, and Mahathir loyalists disgusted with Abdullah.

Nor can Deputy President Dato' Seri Najib Tun Razak take his status as heir apparent for granted. Long believed to have been a deputy Mahathir foisted on a reluctant Abdullah, Najib has seen his claim to succeeding the latter hampered by many obstacles.

Najib has to live down sordid allegations – which he has denied – that seek to link him to the ongoing Altantuya Shaaribu murder trial. Besides, Mahathir, who had urged Abdullah since 2006 to make way for Najib, has given up on Najib for being too 'cowardly' to break openly and immediately with Abdullah.

Most of all, as the likelihood grows of a challenge to Abdullah, Najib's delay in declaring his intentions encourages others, notably, Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, to offer a rallying point for Umno's anti-Abdullah factions.

No man's writ

Razaleigh's declared aim to contest the president's post is hindered by a 'nomination quota' imposed after the 1987 battle between Team A and Team B. To be eligible to contest, he must be nominated by at least 58 Umno divisions.

Abdullah has refused to lift the quota, for sound reasons. In 2000, the quota spared him (then Mahathir's deputy) a Razaleigh challenge. Abdullah means to profit from the quota again this year.

With no one having the stature to unify the party or the authority to pacify it, Umno lurches towards another round of bitter factional fighting. The alignments of opposing camps haven't gelled. But skirmishes have broken out, even within Parliament, petty proxy wars that could grow into a 'war of all against all'.

For the pretenders to top posts and power-brokers, there's much to do, stealthily and quickly, because Umno has reached a well-known political condition: the leader is too weak to impose his will, the led are not yet strong enough to depose him.

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