



Viewpoints contain background analyses and comments on critical global and regional trends, issues and developments. *Viewpoints* also occasionally include analytical reviews of ISEAS books. The responsibility for facts and opinions expressed rests exclusively with the authors and their interpretations do not necessarily reflect the views or policy of ISEAS.

Was Mahathir lulled into waiting too long?

By Ooi Kee Beng

For the Straits Times, Dated 31 August 2006

ON JUNE 7, former Malaysian premier Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad finally decided to openly attack his chosen successor, Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi. Given how little support he has been getting since then, especially within Umno, the former leader may have moved too late. He miscalculated on two counts: He thought he had more support than he actually did; and he thought Datuk Seri Abdullah had less support than has proven to be the case. Furthermore, Tun Dr Mahathir did not realise how relieved many Malaysians were that he had left the corridors of power.

Datuk Seri Abdullah, generally perceived as conflict-averse, had until recently been accused of being too slow and too careful in implementing the reforms he himself had initiated. And after he was seen to have retreated on several fronts, Malaysians began questioning his ability, his will and, indeed, his sincerity in achieving what he had promised in the 2004 election campaign.

The caution he exercised throughout his first two years in office was nevertheless understandable, given that Tun Dr Mahathir was still very much in the picture. While this may have suited Datuk Seri Abdullah's way of doing things, it has also turned out to be an effective tactic. After all, a large number of ministers and Umno leaders generally considered loyal to the retired premier were still in positions of power. Thus, Tun Dr Mahathir, confident of his continuing influence, was lulled into adopting a wait-and-see tactic.

To Tun Dr Mahathir's dismay, the deputy premier he sacked, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, was released from jail in 2004 and was soon suing him. His chosen head for Proton, the car-maker, was let go.

Things were unravelling, and beyond the extent that Tun Dr Mahathir, the life-long politician, might have accepted as a matter of expedience on the part of Datuk Seri Abdullah.

Datuk Seri Abdullah finally carried out a long-awaited Cabinet reshuffle in February this year. Observers were generally dismayed at the lack of changes. Given the elbowing for position within Umno, and the Prime Minister's lack of close supporters, the 'old-new' Cabinet seemed all that he could manage.

Power of incumbency

BUT what is important to note is that the power of incumbency can expand as much through an avoidance of change as it can through radical and sharp changes. Once the reshuffle was announced, loyalists of the old administration, on being retained by Datuk Seri Abdullah, knew where their future lay. They had no problem becoming loyalists of the new government, and, in the process, ditching Tun Dr Mahathir.

As scheduled, Datuk Seri Abdullah announced the five-year Ninth Malaysia Plan the following month. Where infrastructure projects were concerned, it favoured Johor in the south and Penang - the Premier's home state - in the north. These are the areas where Datuk Seri Abdullah is most popular, and support for him grew even stronger.

Soon after that, the decision was made to scrap the Johor-Singapore bridge project. The whole Cabinet lined up behind the decision. Judging from Tun Dr Mahathir's ultimatum this month - that he would stop his attacks if the decision was reversed - this issue was the one that caused him to lose hope in Datuk Seri Abdullah totally.

According to Tun Dr Mahathir, the media refused to report his comments, forcing him finally to 'sleep with the devil', as it were. He went to Malaysiakini, the news website he had abhorred earlier, to state his case and reach a wider audience, and he felt compelled to make somewhat inappropriate use of a peace conference to criticise the administration for reversing his projects. He spoke to whoever would listen, and this included his former political enemies, the leaders of the Islamist Parti Islam SeMalaysia, or PAS.

Despite the miles of print generated by the subsequent arguments, there does not seem to be much that Tun Dr Mahathir can do. Threats to reveal corruption in the government, though welcomed by the public, are not taken seriously. In any case, now that things have gone so far, the Abdullah administration cannot possibly be seen to back down on any issue raised by the former premier. When push came to shove, loyalty to Datuk Seri Abdullah is incomparably stronger than the waning gratefulness to Tun Dr Mahathir. Personal letters sent by Tun Dr Mahathir to Umno divisional leaders to explain his case do not seem to have won him any obvious support.

A make-or-break time is now approaching in the form of Umno's general assembly in late November. Tun Dr Mahathir is pulling all the strings he can to be chosen as a delegate. If he manages that, he will then seek the right to speak to the assembly. Should he fail, the moment will have passed for him. This state of affairs reveals how limited Tun Dr Mahathir's options now are, and how ineffective his campaign against Datuk Seri Abdullah has become. The paradox may very well be that Mahathir Mohamed was the one who was slow, not Abdullah Badawi.

- The writer is a fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. This is a personal comment.