



# IDSS COMMENTARIES (58/2006)

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## **PULLING THE HAIR FROM THE FLOUR Will Abdullah's art of defusing the Mahathir crisis work?**

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THE LATEST leadership conflict in Malaysia triggered by former premier Mahathir Mohamad struck like a stubborn tsunami – it's sudden, swift and tidal in its impact, yet refusing to go back to sea. Two weeks after Mahathir's shocking broadside against his successor, the political leadership rallied around Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi in a move that clearly fortified Abdullah's position. But Mahathir refuses to be cowed and has promised to burrow for answers *sampai ke lubang cacing* – "till the tiniest hole" -- to issues he has been fuming about. Tired of Mahathir's incessant attacks, one of Abdullah's ministers, Nazri Aziz, declared on June 26 an "open war" with the former premier. But Abdullah himself continues to maintain his cool. Everyone now waits with bated breath as to what storm would blow next. Is there anyway for the crisis to end as suddenly as it appeared? Or will the prime minister be forced to hit back hard? Will this blowout go on to shake the edifice of politics, in yet another epic struggle since 1969 when the first prime minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, ended up sacking the young and impetuous Mahathir, from UMNO?

There are three possible outcomes of the current saga. The first, the worst case scenario, points to another battle royal that will end with many heads rolling. Titanic political battles are not new, of course, in UMNO, the dominant party. In the second, nothing earth-shattering will happen despite all the turmoil, and life resumes after that initial outburst. This outcome can only be possible when people, weary of all the clashes, demand that good sense prevail. The third possible outcome is somewhere in the middle. The crisis will eventually blow over, though not before the inevitable struggle plays itself out in a fashion defined by two contrasting personalities – the sterling patience of Abdullah in the face of the combativeness of Mahathir. The third scenario is now in play, even as some of Abdullah's supporters are finding it hard to continue with their restraint.

### **Resilience of the system**

The UMNO-centred political system has over the years developed a certain volatility. At the same time, it has built within itself a capacity for post-conflict rebuilding and reconsolidation. There have been three major leadership crises since the 1980s, yet each time, the system had recovered and the structure remained largely intact. In other words, the system can, and will, take care of itself.

The first systemic response to the current crisis was the June 19 show of solidarity by all the key UMNO leaders. By closing ranks behind Abdullah, the UMNO bigwigs took the first

decisive step for the system to preserve itself in the face of acute adversity. There are however two crucial facilitating factors.

The first is the Abdullah approach to crisis management. Highly sophisticated, but often mistaken for weakness, it is best captured by what Musa Hitam calls Abdullah's "elegant silence". In fact, Abdullah's response takes after the analogy of the bamboo or the water. Rather than heading towards a destructive collision with the hurricane unleashed by his predecessor, Abdullah bends like the bamboo so as not to break. Put another way, he chooses to be like the water in a moving stream. Confronted with a boulder, the water flows around it and moves on. This philosophy will make it easier for the system to take all the hard blows. Indeed, it can achieve the goal of conflict resolution with the minimum of fuss.

The second facilitating factor is the response of Abdullah's deputy, Najib Tun Razak, who has chosen to stand behind his embattled prime minister. His position is delicate in view of all the talk that he stands to gain most from this crisis, which could accelerate his rise to the premiership. By closing ranks with Abdullah, Najib shows that he is in no hurry to take over, and does not relish being used by Mahathir. The combination of these two responses will defuse the explosive combustion from the Mahathir diatribe.

### **Origins of the volatility**

This "resilience-in-volatility" in the political system coincided with one phase in Malaysian politics -- the Mahathir era. Beginning in 1981, it ended 22 years later in 2003 when its personification stepped down as prime minister in favour of Abdullah -- a decision Mahathir now says he regrets.

Despite his retirement, many had doubts whether Mahathir would indeed call it a day, given his personality and temperament. Some even proposed a background role for him as a senior statesman. In typical style, Mahathir had dismissed the notion of being a "Senior Minister" in Cabinet, or even, in his own words, a "Senior President" in UMNO. In an IDSS commentary last year, I asked whether we were seeing a return of the Mahathir era when he broke his vow of silence to attack the government over the issue of car import permits. Now that Mahathir has taken on the surprising post-retirement role of a hyper-critic, one wonders whether this is what he had in mind for himself all along.

Mahathir the critic is however not something out of character. Six years after bouncing back into UMNO following his sacking by Tunku in 1969, Mahathir proved to be a key player in the country's succession politics. When Hussein Onn stepped down in 1981 five years after taking over from Tun Razak, it was Mahathir who succeeded as prime minister. A visionary and maverick who played by his own rules and led with his quick tongue and an equally quick mind, Mahathir made both impact and controversy. His sharp attacks were aimed equally at the West, the country's neighbours and the domestic opposition. Now, as we have seen, even his successor is not spared. But while Mahathir's achievements are undeniably many, his travails and peculiarities can also be too heavy a burden for others to carry.

The crisis that he has unleashed bears the ultimate risk of him being thrown out of UMNO again. But Abdullah would not turn him into a martyr and talk about history repeating itself at the June 19 meeting of UMNO leaders did not materialize. Had Mahathir been sacked a second time, the former premier might just bounce back like he did earlier in his political career. So, in that respect, Abdullah must have calculated his own moves very well; he continues to stick to the moral high ground to be both the bamboo and the water.

## Conclusion

Even in his twilight days, Mahathir's strong personality continues to resonate. Abdullah's challenge is how to manage the crisis in his hands as Mahathir taunts his successor to sack him. With too much at stake for too many people, Abdullah's tricky challenge is best captured in the Malay saying – *menarik rambut dalam tepung* – removing gently the hair in the flour. How can he do this without disturbing the contours of the flour in the bowl? Abdullah has said that he wants nobody hurt along the way, yet it is Mahathir who could lose most in a massive public disclosure. His deputy, Najib, playing the loyal second man again, echoed this approach. If this is the primary consideration, then the crisis will be contained because one side simply refuses to fight, even though that would clearly be an option for Abdullah. But how long?

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