

MALAYSIA'S GENERAL ELECTIONS AMIDST THE SHADOW OF RE-MAHATHIRISATION

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This article discusses the phenomenon of re-Mahathirisation which engulfed the politics of Malaysia's ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition and its main component party, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO). Re-Mahathirisation refers to the increase in attachment towards the legacy of Malaysia's fourth Prime Minister, Dr. Mahathir Mohamad (1981–2003). Transpiring not long after Mahathir's relinquishment of official power, the process was seen as approaching a peak with BN-UMNO's campaign for the 13th General Elections (GE13) of May 2013. It was orchestrated especially by conservative elements in UMNO disillusioned with the political liberalisation began by his successor Abdullah Ahmad Badawi (2003–2009) and continued by Najib Razak. In line with an understanding of conservatism as characterised by resistance against radical change and by admiration of past values, re-Mahathirisation was employed by the BN-UMNO regime during the GE13 hustings to court the large pool of conservative-minded Malay voters. The successful dislodging of Abdullah Badawi from the party-cum-national leadership in 2009 signified a powerful return of Mahathirism to the foreground of UMNO and national politics. Although Najib Razak has pursued Abdullah's political liberalisation initiatives, he felt compelled to tolerate a rising public presence of Mahathir. Re-Mahathirisation has not proceeded without salient implications for UMNO. In the short term, UMNO as a dominant conservative party has strongly rebuilt its legitimacy as the vanguard of the Malay-Islamic agenda ever circumspect of attempts to reform existing multi-racial power sharing arrangements. However, Mahathir's aligning with right wing Malay conservative groups has countered the gains that could be reaped from Najib Razak's dogged advocacy of political reform. As a consequence, BN managed to retain power by virtue only of the heavy electoral weightage given to rural areas. To non-Malays and middle class Malays, UMNO's intransigence to change arguably owes much to its association with Mahathir's recent divisive approach, fear-mongering and unbridled use of conservative rhetoric.

Keywords: Mahathir Mohamad, Abdullah Badawi, Najib Razak, conservatism, general election

Lupakan National Reconciliation. *Sebaliknya*, strengthen Malay Unity. *Gerakkan semula Biro Tatanegara*. This is our last fort against these racist Chinese. Also, learn and adopt Mahathir's strategies.

[Forget National Reconciliation. On the contrary, strengthen Malay Unity. Re-activate the National Civics Bureau. This is our last fort against these racist Chinese. Also, learn and adopt Mahathir's strategies].

Sharif Tojan, letter to the editor, *Utusan Malaysia*, 7 May 2013, two days after the 13th General Elections (GE13).

INTRODUCTION

As the 13th General Elections (GE13) approached, some figures known to be avid supporters of Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, Malaysia's domineering Prime Minister from 1981 until 2003, had predicted that the political tsunami following the previous 12th GE (GE12) of 2008 would not recur (cf. Zainuddin, 2013; Ahiruddin, 2013). Their reasoning was based mainly on Mahathir's return to the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), having dramatically left in May 2008 in his bid to compel his successor Abdullah Ahmad Badawi to relinquish leadership of UMNO and the country, and his active role in campaigning for the ruling UMNO-dominated Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition. Contrary to such expectations, however, not only did results of GE13 reflect the BN regime's failure to maintain hegemony, but they also seemed to signal that attempts at re-Mahathirisation purportedly engineered by his enthusiasts since Abdullah's exit in March 2009, had been in vain. What became ever more apparent was Mahathirism's loss of ideological appeal. Instead of becoming a potential asset to boost Prime Minister Najib Razak's flagging popularity, the identification of Mahathir with Najib Razak's leadership served only to de-legitimise it further. Not only were the results for BN worse than when Abdullah presided over BN's ignominy of losing its two-thirds parliamentary majority in 2008, but they also proved that Mahathir's embedded conservatism was a repellent to the many votes of non-Malays, moderately inclined Malays and urbanites of mixed racial backgrounds. The coalition's successes in retaining power at the national level and recapturing the reins of government in Kedah, Mahathir's home state, were grounded on a hardening of ethnocentric attitudes among the traditionally UMNO-supporting rural and conservative Malays. This grim fact ran contrary to the impression given by Najib Razak of running a reform-oriented, liberal and open administration.

In this article, we examine the path trodden by re-Mahathirisation, whose origin can be located to the spat between Mahathir and Abdullah in 2006 and which peaked during the campaigning for GE13. Studies on GE12 were inclined to marginalise Mahathir's role in BN-UMNO's dismal performance (cf. Ufen, 2008; O'Shannassy, 2008; Pepinsky, 2009), thus seemingly brushing aside the importance of intra-elite conflicts within UMNO as a determinant of its popular support. We define re-Mahathirisation as the increase in attachment towards the legacy and popularity of Mahathir, designed to rebuild UMNO's standing which had greatly suffered since its setback in 2008. Re-Mahathirisation was symptomatic of not only Mahathir's own craving to re-assert his influence within the UMNO fraternity, but also of party conservatives' insatiable desire to reclaim dominance and thereby halt the political liberalisation put into motion by Najib Razak. Their concerted efforts to stem the tide of liberalisation are in sync with the conceptual understanding of conservatism as encompassing not only opposition against radical changes, but also admiration of past values to a significant degree (Mohamad Abu Bakar, 2000: 122–123). Attachment towards Mahathirism, particularly its cherished notion of strong leadership and government, hence evincing the top brass leadership's wholesale dominance and rejection of political pluralism, became one of the major strategies of Najib Razak's regime in facing GE13.

ABDULLAH AHMAD BADAWI'S UNSUCCESSFUL ATTEMPT AT DE-MAHATHIRISATION

For seasoned observers of Malaysia's political scene, the resilience of the BN-UMNO ruling regime is undergirded by not only its ability to manipulate the traditional 3Ms of media, machinery and money, but includes also a fourth M: Mahathir. For twenty-two long years, his iron fist leadership consistently demonstrated trappings of domination, conservatism, belief in order and control, personalism, conformity and a non-responsive attitude to change (cf. Khoo, 1995; Milne and Mauzy, 1999; Hilley, 2001; Hwang, 2003). Even as BN-UMNO was starting to face an erosion of legitimacy following the *reformasi* (reformation) euphoria which engulfed the nation during the 10th GE (GE10) of 1999, Mahathir was adamant in resisting transformation of mores and norms prevailing in the political groupings he led. On the contrary, he tightened his grip over power, further dampening prospects for organic change from within UMNO and BN.

The results of the 11th GE (GE11) of 2004, held barely six months into Abdullah's Premiership, seemed to vindicate Mahathir's preference for Abdullah as his successor, at least for the short term purpose of recovering the ground that BN-UMNO lost in 1999 to Anwar Ibrahim, the opposition icon whom Mahathir had unceremoniously sacked as Deputy Prime Minister and Deputy President of

UMNO just one year earlier. Campaigning on the twin platform of good governance and *Islam Hadhari* (civilisational Islam), Abdullah commandeered BN to garner a convincing tally of 63.8% of the popular vote, which translated to 199 out of 219 (90.9%) seats in Parliament. BN recaptured the state of Terengganu from the Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS), and almost wrested control of Kelantan, ruled by PAS since 1990. The Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR), formed out of a merger between KEADILAN and the Parti Rakyat Malaysia (PRM), could only salvage a single parliamentary seat through its President Wan Azizah in Permatang Pauh, Anwar Ibrahim's former constituency (Funston, 2006: 132–137).

Mahathir had originally chosen Abdullah to succeed him on the understanding that Abdullah would preside over the continuity of Mahathir's policies. In an interview held a fortnight before his resignation, Mahathir reflected on his earlier intentions to pass the Premiership baton to his erstwhile deputies in 1998 and 2002, but had delayed the transfer of power in order to fulfil his responsibility of ensuring that the party and national economy were in good shape upon his exit (Mahathir, 2003). Mahathir attributed his agreement to delay his resignation, which he shockingly announced during his closing speech of the UMNO General Assembly of 2002, to pleas by UMNO quarters for him to stay on until UMNO leaders of all factions had rallied around Abdullah as Mahathir's anointed successor (Yang, 2005: 247). Abdullah initially professed the mettle and willingness to grapple with problems left behind by Mahathir, with whom he was careful not to portray differences (Abdullah, 2004b). He proclaimed to have inherited a largely successful government, whose unfinished tasks, however, he pledged to complete in his own way, for he did not have what it took to become a carbon copy of his predecessor (Abdullah, 2004a).

Barely one year into Abdullah's prime ministerial tenure, strong indications appeared that a subtle de-Mahathirisation process was under way. Abdullah's calls for greater accountability and transparency, higher bureaucratic efficiency, cuts in extravagant spending on mega-projects, revival of the agricultural sector, judicial reform and backed above all by a determined anti-corruption drive, found resonance within both liberal-secular and Islamist elements of civil society. Their enthusiasm for a new refined leader in place of the obtrusive Mahathir, overcame whatever doubts they might have harboured of Abdullah, who enjoyed a honeymoon during the first year of his administration (Khoo, 2004; Funston, 2006: 142–144). During these early stages of Abdullah's administration, Mahathir was still magnanimous in his appraisal of Abdullah as a leader possessing similar policies, albeit implemented differently (*Mingguan Malaysia*, 2004). In his own way, Abdullah had substantively disentangled the meaning of *reformasi* from its invariable association with Anwar Ibrahim's post-1998 civil society movement. Abdullah's path till then was in line with the law of accumulated hatred, whereby any new leader would endeavour to extricate himself and his administration from a previously detested leader in his search for

a new legitimacy (cf. Pospelovsky, 1968: 317–318). Although not freeing himself totally from vestiges of Mahathir's legacy, Abdullah's determination was enough to convince people that Malaysia was well on the way towards gradually exorcising the excesses of the 22 years of Mahathir's authoritarian rule.

However, the conservative faction within UMNO was not to be easily subdued. As far as ordinary grassroots Malays were concerned, Mahathirism, notwithstanding all political controversies that it generated, had charted out a winning formula. Until the time of his official retirement, Mahathir's image as a Malay-Muslim folk hero persevered in the common Malay imagination. The rise of Malaysia from mediocrity to a successful developing economic power was credited to Mahathir. Since ambitiously introducing in 1991 his Vision 2020, which revolved around an innovative *Bangsa Malaysia* (Malaysian nation) discourse (Ooi, 2006), Mahathir had been prodding Malaysians to achieve heights in diverse fields and undertakings, spurred by the slogan "*Malaysia Boleh*" (Malaysia Can). The UMNO rank-and-file member and ordinary Malay on the street had been acculturated into tolerating supposedly for their own good all collateral damage arising from Mahathir's rule, as externalised in various forms of unceasing repression against political opponents such as opposition parties and figures, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), trade unionists, Islamists and the royalty. Ironically, Mahathir's aggressive leadership style, variously described as "assertive, contentious, confrontational, and abusive" (Case, 1991: 458), had a most unMalay streak to it. In order to maintain UMNO's position as the undisputed representative of Malays in any power sharing arrangement, Mahathir employed patronage politics to perfection.

Ultimately, it was Mahathir's ruthless grasp on UMNO-linked patronage networks that outflanked Anwar Ibrahim's alleged machinations to topple his boss in 1998, as much as it saw him prevail over Abdullah in 2006–2009, despite the latter's apparent advantage of incumbency of official posts in party and government. Abdullah, lacking a power base, was widely perceived as a weakling in internal UMNO politics. Not only was his sober conduct, personal charm, and "Mr. Nice Guy" image ill-suited to the rough and tumble of UMNO realpolitik, but Abdullah's long tenure in the Foreign Ministry – conventionally led by ministers of bureaucratic disposition without long-term leadership ambitions, had also deprived him the time and opportunity of fostering grassroots support via the myriad nexuses available to an UMNO power broker. In short, the choice of Abdullah as Mahathir's handpicked successor was due to the belief that he posed no threat to Mahathir's hegemony, let alone being one to uproot his predecessor's legacy (Yang, 2005: 224). It was simply premature to expect Mahathir to leave Abdullah to his own devices, for Abdullah from the outset of his Premiership was regarded by Mahathir as just a proxy to complete his "unfinished agenda" – a theme which Mahathir consistently harped upon since his historic castigation of fellow Malays during the UMNO General Assembly of 2002 (Mahathir, 2002; Firdaus, 2006).

The first of Abdullah's actions that Mahathir sought to influence was the choice of Najib Razak as Deputy Prime Minister. Quite apart from the question of Mahathir's confidence in Najib Razak's ability, we should also consider the fact that Mahathir was greatly indebted to Najib Razak's father, second Prime Minister Abdul Razak Hussein, in rehabilitating Mahathir's political career after being expelled from UMNO in 1969 by Tunku Abdul Rahman. Mahathir's wish was purportedly conveyed through *New Straits Times* (NST) Editor-in-Chief Abdullah Ahmad, who was eventually booted out in favour of Kalimullah Hassan, a member of Abdullah's inner circle. If Mahathir had expected a docile successor who would continually ask him for guidance and ideas, he would have been sorely disappointed. Abdullah had cultivated a team of young "neo-conservative intellectuals" to advise him, led by his budding son-in-law Khairy Jamaluddin who eventually won the contest to head UMNO Youth against Mahathir's son, Mukhriz Mahathir (Muhamad Takiyuddin and Ahmad Fauzi, 2013). The victorious outcome of GE11 further boosted Abdullah's credentials, providing him the legitimacy to break away completely from Mahathir. One year into his Premiership, the only counsel from Mahathir that Abdullah felt worth following was one not to drop a particular minister during a cabinet reshuffle (*The Star*, 2004). Up till then, Mahathir seemed intent on honouring his promise not to interfere in his successor's management of the country, refusing to contemplate accepting an advisory role as "Senior Minister" in the manner of Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew (Yang, 2005: 256–259).

As a measure of goodwill, the government appointed Mahathir to become advisor to the national oil company Petroleum Nasional (PETRONAS) and the national car company Perusahaan Otomobil Nasional (PROTON). But as time passed Abdullah's generosity backfired. It was in his capacity as advisor to PROTON that disagreements between Mahathir and Abdullah first surfaced. Mahathir had given unflinching support to PROTON's Chief Executive Tengku Mahaleel, who was under pressure for articulating statements which were at variance with the government's automotive policy (*Mingguan Malaysia*, 2005; *Berita Harian*, 2005). Mahathir then directly criticised the government's policy of allegedly issuing Approved Permits (APs) to import cars to only a handful of connected former civil servants-turned-businessmen (*The Star*, 2005). When the government refused to extend Tengku Mahaleel's contract, Mahathir groused that he had not been consulted (*Utusan Malaysia*, 2005a). The AP issue had pitted Mahathir against Minister of International Trade and Industry Rafidah Aziz, who was directed by the cabinet to send a letter of explanation to Mahathir and to follow suit by divulging the names of top AP recipients in the media (*Utusan Malaysia*, 2005b).

In 2006-2007, Mahathir's impatience at being sidelined in decision-making appeared to be reaching maximum heights as he stepped up attacks against Abdullah. Mahathir openly questioned the wisdom of Abdullah's economic policies, especially his cancellation of Mahathir-initiated mega-

projects. Confessing that he wanted to be remembered most for his industrialisation legacy, Mahathir accused Abdullah, out of a desire to make a personal imprint on national policy-making, of discarding beneficial strategies, notwithstanding their huge expenses (Mahathir, 2006). In April 2006, via a widely circulated letter, Mahathir rebuked the government for forsaking national sovereignty by failing to assert Malaysia's rights to build the "scenic" or "crooked" bridge joining Malaysia and Singapore (*Suara Keadilan*, 2006). Apart from justifying the abandonment of the bridge project as the unanimous result of cabinet decision-making (*Berita Harian*, 2006), Abdullah maintained an "elegant silence" in response to intensifying criticisms levelled by Mahathir. Abdullah preferred to let his ministers, UMNO politicians and government officials defend his policies and furnished evidence to back them up (*New Straits Times*, 2006a). This brought forth further allegations of Abdullah's transformation of UMNO into a personal party and of Malaysia into a police state (Mahathir, 2006). Ignoring pleas from his former political secretary Johari Baharum, who was also Deputy Minister of Internal Security, and from former Deputy Premier Musa Hitam for him to stop criticising the government (*Utusan Malaysia*, 2006e; *New Straits Times*, 2006c), Mahathir injected a more personal note into his tirade by accusing Abdullah of back-stabbing him, of being manipulated by his son-in-law Khairy Jamaluddin, of unduly using his position to protect the business interests of his son Kamaluddin, and of silently approving media demonisation of Mahathir (Khoo, 2006; *New Straits Times*, 2006b).

It was after matters increasingly assumed personal tones that Abdullah came out into the open to deny Mahathir's allegations. Abdullah brushed aside accusations of corruption and nepotism as baseless (*Utusan Malaysia*, 2006a; 2006d; *The Star*, 2006a; 2006b). But coming from such a domineering figure as Mahathir, it is unlikely that his charges did not resonate at all within the population, especially the concerned middle class (Beech, 2006). This new middle class, engendered by the phenomenal industrialisation under Mahathir, had begun to become acquainted with such liberal values as freedom, justice, transparency and accountability. But they were as yet unprepared to sacrifice socio-economic stability and pecuniary advancement in exchange for such values. In their search for perpetual social advancement, they ended up tolerating a fair amount of authoritarianism (Kessler, 2001: 41–44; Abdul Rahman, 2001: 87–98). It was this group, coaxed by material benefits and cowed by coercive legislation to remain politically docile during Mahathir's era, which he was now trying to galvanise to speak up against power abuses under Abdullah. Paradoxically, in his outcry over the mainstream media blackout against him, Mahathir had tasted his own bitter medicine, for it was Mahathir himself who had laid the foundations for the authoritarian state which entrenched the "culture of fear" among Malaysians (Farish, 2006). The most notorious clampdown of civil society during Mahathir's era, the Operation Lalang of October 1987, for instance, ended up detaining without trial under the Internal Security Act (ISA)

106 dissidents on the pretext of preventing inter-ethnic discord. Those arrested ranged from opposition leaders, UMNO mavericks, Chinese educationists, environmentalists, social workers, academics and entrepreneurs (Saravanamuttu, 1987: 68).

After several failed efforts at mediation, Mahathir eventually met Abdullah face-to-face on the occasion of the *Eid al-fitr* (end of Ramadan) celebrations in October 2006. Optimism that their relationship would turn for the better was swiftly shattered when Mahathir resumed his tongue-lashing of Abdullah and his government no less than 17 hours after their meeting (*Utusan Malaysia*, 2006b; Tan, 2006). Mahathir attempted to thrust himself forward as a candidate to be selected as a delegate of the Kubang Pasu division to the forthcoming UMNO General Assembly, only to be humiliatingly defeated. Unable to accept rejection by division members of whom he was their long-time leader, Mahathir blamed bribery as the cause of his defeat, incurring renewed anger from leading UMNO circles (*Utusan Malaysia*, 2006c). A mild heart attack, consigning Mahathir to the National Heart Institute and preventing his presence at the UMNO General Assembly as a guest, temporarily slowed down the intensity of Mahathir's assaults. Despite being accused of wanting to wreck UMNO and topple Abdullah, Mahathir was insistent that his critique of Abdullah's administration was a national duty to save his country and party from bad leadership. He continued to profess loyalty to UMNO and stridently rejected overtures by opposition parties (Tan, 2007a; *The Star*, 2007).

By then, in a twist of irony, Mahathir had struck a seemingly amorphous alliance with civil society elements in his ceaseless endeavour to air his views to the public. With the wealth of information about the political underworld that Mahathir could potentially bring to anti-establishment websites, the alternative media strongmen, some of whom had suffered under Mahathir's coercive apparatus, welcomed him (Tan, 2007b). In a meeting with some 100 members of the blogging community at his Perdana Leadership Foundation headquarters in Putrajaya in August 2007, Mahathir, describing bloggers as the "*only hope*" left to institute change in Malaysia, urged them to raise pressure on an UMNO-led government increasingly intolerant of criticism (Jalleh, 2007: 21). In exclusive interviews with the pro-PAS tabloid *Siasah*, Mahathir showed no aversion to the idea of Kelantan retaining a PAS government in the forthcoming elections, if only to give a lesson to the overbearing UMNO (*Siasah*, 2007b). In addition, he virulently lambasted major economic initiatives of Abdullah's government such as Johor's Iskandar Development Region for selling out to Singapore, and the second Penang bridge for acceding to high interest payments to China, when state agencies such as PETRONAS and the Employees Provident Fund (EPF) were believed to have amassed huge profits. Contrasting the present UMNO members' acquiescence to Abdullah with recurring attempts by factional adversaries to dislodge him from the Presidency, Mahathir cynically characterised the

transformation as one from UMNO to "UMYes" – a party of "yes men" (*Siasah*, 2007a).

Come March 2008, BN's shockingly dismal performance in GE12 was attributed to a variety of factors, viz. large-scale desertion of BN by non-Malays and young urban Malay-Muslims, the arrogance of power-wielding BN politicians and civil servants, the arrival of the new information and communication technology (ICT) media whose impact BN under-estimated, and mainstream media overkill in its character assassination of Anwar Ibrahim (cf. Goh, 2008; Karim, 2008; Teoh, 2008). Not only had BN unprecedentedly failed to muster a two-thirds majority in Parliament, it also lost state governments of Pulau Pinang, Selangor, Perak, Kelantan and Kedah to the Democratic Action Party (DAP)-PKR-PAS electoral pact, formalised thereafter as the Pakatan Rakyat (PR). With a combined 82 seats *vis-à-vis* BN's 140, Gabungan Pilihanraya Bersih dan Adil (BERSIH) extrapolated that the opposition parties would have won outright if the elections had been conducted in a free, fair and transparent manner (Wong, 2008). There was a prevailing sense that BN had lost touch with the sentiments of the grassroots population and even of its own average supporter, and had to be taught a lesson (cf. Zainon, 2008).

While acknowledging the rise of a united opposition front in eroding Abdullah's legitimacy, Mahathir Mohamad's unrepentant rebukes of his successor damaged Abdullah's credibility in a way that Anwar Ibrahim could not have done. For example, Mahathir publicly claimed that in accepting power, Abdullah had relented to a gentleman's agreement that he became Prime Minister for only one term (*The Star*, 2008c). Despite firm denials by Abdullah (*The Star*, 2008b), the raising of such a possibility in the public domain was sufficient to augment the impression of Abdullah as a weak and indecisive leader. To the budding Malay-Muslim NGOs thriving on rising Malay ethnocentrism and UMNO conservatives, Mahathir appealed to the argument that UMNO under Abdullah had lost its role as protector of the Malays (Gomez, 2008). In a forum on 1 April 2008, Mahathir and a few UMNO leaders such as his son Mukhriz, former Selangor Chief Minister Khir Toyo and Batu Pahat strongman Puad Zarkashi openly chided Abdullah's leadership and called for a resurrection of UMNO's glorious years under Mahathir (Tunku Aisha, 2008). In an interview with *Mingguan Malaysia*, Abdullah's deputy Muhyiddin Yassin not only unexpectedly concurred with Mahathir's sentiments, but also prodded for a quicker changeover of party leadership than imagined by Abdullah on account of UMNO's "very dangerous" situation (Muhyiddin, 2008). Encouraged by such support, Mahathir resorted to undermine Abdullah's hold over UMNO by inciting divisiveness among its upper echelons of leaders, communicated via occasional press conferences, letters to the English language press and as of 1 May 2008, his Internet blog. In his ruminations, Mahathir consistently maintained the position that Abdullah's weak leadership had ruined and destabilised both UMNO and BN

and as a responsible leader, the only honourable option left for Abdullah was to resign from leadership posts of both party and country (*The Sun*, 2008a; 2008b).

As far as the opposition was concerned, Mahathir was a godsend. As testified by Dr. Dzulkifli Ahmad, PAS Research Director-cum-newly elected Kuala Selangor MP, "...from our findings, the approval rate for Abdullah came tumbling down on many occasions especially every time former Prime Minister Tun Mahathir Mohamad criticized him" (Dzulkifli, 2008). PAS Vice-President Mohamad Sabu similarly admitted, "Dr. Mahathir's criticisms actually helped a lot in opposition victories all over the country" (*Harakah*, 2008). In February 2008, Mahathir censured Abdullah's version of *Islam Hadhari* as "confusing" – a *faux pas* which PAS gladly pounced upon (*Siasah*, 2008). On his part, Mahathir suspected that opposition figures, in apparently defending Abdullah against Mahathir's tirade, harboured an ulterior motive of wanting to see the continuation of a regime which persistently alienated traditional BN voters (Mahathir, 2008b). So determined was Mahathir in wanting Abdullah to step down from power that in May 2008, he took the astounding step of quitting UMNO which he claimed had strayed from the noble objectives as originally conceived by its founding founders (*The Star*, 2008a). The consequent exodus of UMNO members he had hoped for, however, did not materialise, and only his wife Siti Hasmah, his son Mokhzani and former Kedah Chief Minister Sanusi Junid followed suit.

In August 2008, Anwar Ibrahim's re-entry into Parliament following his thumping by-election victory for the Permatang Pauh seat vacated by his wife, and consequent speculations of PR having the numbers to topple the government through defections of BN MPs, continued to shake the BN and put tremendous pressure on Abdullah to fast-track his exit from top party and governments posts, originally planned for June 2010. On 8 September, Khir Toyo wrote that "[UMNO] had a weak leader" and urged Mahathir to play a bigger role to rectify the prevailing state of affairs. He even speculated that the dreaded 13 May tragedy could recur if Abdullah remained adamant to stay on in power (Khir, 2008). Political journalist Joceline Tan later reported how "visibly shaken" Abdullah had been by the vociferousness of his cabinet colleagues including Muhyiddin Yassin, Shafie Apdal, Hishamuddin Hussein and Rafidah Aziz in demanding that he bring forward his leadership transition plan (Tan, 2008). This was despite Abdullah's handing over of the post of Finance Minister to Najib Razak on 17 September. Instead of welcoming Abdullah's official announcement not to defend the UMNO Presidency in the forthcoming party elections, Mahathir added wound to Abdullah's injury by exhorting him not to interfere in Najib Razak's role lest the latter lose popular support (*Utusan Malaysia*, 2008). Mahathir also called for a re-enactment of the concept of "strong government" in state governance so as to ameliorate ethnic relations and economic development (Mahathir, 2008a).

The UMNO General Assembly, held from 24 to 28 March 2009, was surrounded by allegations of corruption against those identified as belonging to

Abdullah's camp, such as Vice President Ali Rustam and Khairy Jamaluddin. Mahathir's determination to stamp his influence on the Assembly's proceedings was underscored by his blunt calls for the exclusion of the pro-Abdullah figures of Muhammad Md. Taib and Ali Rustam from Najib Razak's administration, plus his open support for Muhyiddin Yassin and Shafie Apdal who had earlier demanded Abdullah's resignation (*Mingguan Malaysia*, 2008). The delegates' reaction to Mahathir's advances, however, was mixed. On the one hand, the younger delegates endorsed the reform-oriented Khairy Jamaluddin as UMNO Youth Chief, beating off a challenge from Mukhriz Mahathir, Mahathir's son. On the other hand, reactionary calls could be heard wanting an effective abandonment of Abdullah's reformist policies, and a return instead to norms widely practised before Abdullah's era, such as uncompromising attitudes towards the opposition, reservations of executive positions in government-linked companies (GLCs) and public universities for UMNO loyalists, resurrection of comprehensive controls over levers of power, granting of power to approve business permits to UMNO Division Heads, abolition of the party disciplinary board, and the revocation of government scholarships held by students found to be supporting opposition parties (cf. *Malaysiakini*, 2009a; 2009b; *The Nut Graph*, 2009; *The Malaysian Insider*, 2009a; 2009b; *Utusan Malaysia*, 2009).

In his final keynote address as UMNO President, Abdullah urged members to give serious attention to reforming the party. He pin-pointed five factors which had lately driven a wedge between the people and UMNO, viz. UMNO's own failure to bridge the gap between it and the people, lack of attention to rural folk, disconnect with the younger generation, unending intra-factional disputes and a slew of materialistic reasons. Without referring directly to Mahathir, but bemoaning the rise of reactionary voices, Abdullah called for a halt to all moves to nostalgically revive "an old order" which characteristically limited freedom of expression (Abdullah, 2009). What emerged from the General Assembly was not united voices sentimentally issuing farewell messages to Abdullah, but rather a party divided between reformists and anti-reform elements who looked up inspiringly to Mahathir as their intellectual godfather. The final day scenario on the main stage of the Assembly was telling. While common sense would have presumably led delegates to emphasise the contributions of Abdullah as their outgoing President, it was Mahathir instead who stole the limelight with three rousing standing ovations. As the final act on stage, the three immediate Presidents of UMNO stood juxtaposed to each other, but it was Mahathir who occupied the central position, flanked on his left and right by Abdullah and Najib Razak – an ominous signal of who the real power behind UMNO's throne was, or at least who craved to be so. Rightly so, only three days had passed since the apparent reconciliation on stage when Mahathir resorted to his old ways of lambasting Abdullah as the cause of the multifarious problems currently engulfing Malaysia (Mahathir, 2009).

NAJIB RAZAK AND RE-MAHATHIRISATION

Upon assuming the UMNO Presidency and Premiership of the country, Najib Razak gave signals that he was not about to abandon the reforms put into motion by Abdullah to return instead to Mahathirism. He declared instructively an end to the eras of "government knows best" and of excessive controls, initiated amendments to the UMNO constitution to arrest the malaise of money politics, continued economic liberalisation, undertook a moderate nation-building path via his "1Malaysia" scheme, adopted an open outlook on the issue of tertiary students' involvement in politics, and agreed to look into abolishing the ISA whilst renouncing its use as a partisan political weapon. At the same time, however, Najib Razak never under-estimated the fact that the UMNO rank-and-file felt a "moral revulsion" against Abdullah's leadership. He therefore had to, to a certain extent restore facets of Mahathirism in an effort to regain legitimacy. Not only was Mahathir the first public figure Najib Razak met after being sworn in as Malaysia's sixth Prime Minister – an occasion used to invite the octogenarian back into UMNO, but Mahathir's son Mukhriz was also appointed as the Deputy Minister of International Trade and Industry despite losing out to Khairy Jamaluddin in the contest for UMNO Youth's top post. Mahathir did not wait long to re-assert his influence in UMNO, playing an active campaigning role for UMNO in the hustings for the Bukit Gantang parliamentary by-election on 7 April 2009, which the BN candidate Ismail Safian lost to Mohammad Nizar Jamaluddin, who just two months earlier was deposed as Chief Minister of Perak in a Najib Razak-engineered BN-UMNO takeover of the state government (Ahmad Fauzi and Muhamad Takiyuddin, 2012: 938–942).

Najib Razak's strategy of re-incorporating Mahathir in UMNO affairs could also be seen as a stopgap measure to stem the tide of disunity among grassroots members of the party. By re-asserting Mahathir as an important figure, he could rebuild UMNO's legitimacy in a relatively short period through the same law of accumulated hatred previously employed by Abdullah. In its early phase, this balancing act benefited Najib Razak. Hitherto fragmented conservative forces were successfully co-opted by Najib Razak into a coherent force. In the media industry, for instance, pro-Mahathir bloggers sidelined during Abdullah's years such as Ahiruddin Atan, Nuraina Samad dan A. Kadir Jasin were accepted back as editorial advisors or editorial board members of the NST group. Under Abdullah's confidante Kalimullah Hassan, NST had to weather fierce criticism from UMNO conservatives such as Information Minister Zainuddin Maidin who accused it of relegating its traditional pro-UMNO agenda (Muhamad Takiyuddin and Ahmad Fauzi, 2013: 87–89). The joining of forces between NST and another UMNO-linked mainstream newspaper, *Utusan Malaysia*, which had adopted a cautious approach towards Abdullah's liberalising measures, gave Mahathir a potent platform through which to communicate his views. It was an open secret that many *Utusan Malaysia* senior journalists were

inclined to make Mahathir's era as the benchmark in governance. Other pro-establishment blogs such as *bigdogdotcom* maintained by Zakhir Mohamed, *Jebat Must Die* and *Another Brick in the Wall* also played significant roles in foregrounding Mahathir's hegemonic personality (cf. Zaini, 2010).

The re-Mahathirisation process was enthusiastically taken up by economic elites, state bureaucrats, sections of the academia and mainstream media outlets. Mahathir responded positively to invitations and offers to deliver keynote speeches and lectures, to confer awards and to be honoured with national accolades such as the National Reading Icon. Apart from allowing Mahathir more prominence in public space, Najib Razak re-emphasised Mahathir-era yardsticks such as robust economic development and promulgated plans for new iconic buildings such as the Warisan Tower and the Razak Exchange reminiscent of Mahathir-era mega-projects. Conformist literature on Mahathir by both state-connected and independent publishers proliferated, bearing such titles as *Dr Mahathir: Warkah Terpilih Dari Pemimpin Dunia* [Dr Mahathir: Selected Letters From World Leaders], *Surat Daripada Dr Mahathir* [Letter From Dr Mahathir], *How To Think Like Mahathir*, *Conversations with Mahathir Mohamad*, *Notes to the Prime Minister* and a coffee table book, *Che Det*. His contributions at the international level were given huge publicity in such countries as Japan, and via his Perdana Global Peace Foundation, he emerged as the voice of conscience for such global causes as the plight of uprooted communities in Palestine, Iraq, Myanmar and Syria. The only exception to this re-Mahathirisation trend was the publication in 2009 of former *Asian Wall Street Journal* journalist Barry Wain's book, *Malaysian Maverick: Mahathir Mohamad in Turbulent Times*. UMNO conservatives sought to discredit *Malaysian Maverick* as a conscious attempt to destroy Mahathir's legacy by blaming all of the nation's ills on him. Notorious in the book were allegations of financial improprieties committed by Mahathir, leading to a draining of national resources and reserves (Wain, 2009: 149–182). Conservatives were even prepared to put the question of academic objectivity aside when they severely reprimanded Universiti Malaya for organising a book discussion session of *Malaysian Maverick* (*Utusan Malaysia*, 2010). Mahathir characteristically refused to take legal action against Wain, thus inadvertently reducing his unpopularity among Malaysia's literate populace. Najib Razak, for his part, was careful not to be seen to be at odds with Mahathir during any of the public events attended by both of them. In fact, Najib Razak more than often appeared happy to let Mahathir have all the publicity he wanted while Najib Razak himself remained in the background.

Buoyed by the UMNO elites' celebration of his personage, Mahathir exploited the eulogistic environment favouring him to vilify Abdullah's leadership. Blame was heaped on Abdullah for the various ills seen to have befallen the party and country since Mahathir bowed out of the official corridors of power. In Najib Razak's era, Mahathir's vituperative criticisms of Abdullah were afforded large coverage in the mainstream press particularly *Utusan*

Malaysia (cf. Mahathir, 2011a; *Utusan Malaysia*, 2011). Ironically, not a single UMNO personality dared to speak out in defence of Abdullah, with the exception of those who were operating outside UMNO's core system. Reformist elements in the opposition and civil society had greater appreciation of Abdullah's contributions in opening up the political system but their voices were relatively muted in the public sphere. Moreover, they could not be over-generous in praising Abdullah lest their compliments be turned to UMNO's advantage when the harsh reality was that Abdullah was deserted by his own party for his stalled reformation efforts. Among major mistakes committed by Abdullah, according to his former cabinet colleague Shahrir Samad, was declaring himself to be "Prime Minister for All Malaysians" in his attempt to bring UMNO to a centrist position. While the shift was theoretically sound, Abdullah's drastic move away from UMNO's conventional equilibrium threatened vested interests and thus deprived Abdullah of grassroots backing from UMNO's entrenched support system (Shahrir Samad, pers. comm., 15 December 2009). Once out of power, nobody came to his rescue in the face of Mahathir's admonitions. In actual fact Mahathir had a field day in condemning Abdullah. The country-wide excitement surrounding the publication in 2011 of Mahathir's memoir, *A Doctor in the House* confirmed his developing cult status as encouraged by the ruling UMNO establishment, regardless of some factual inaccuracies and his obvious tendency to absolve himself of all errors of judgement in the book. The overriding theme throughout the memoir was justification of his motto of "I did it my way".

Since stepping down as party-level and national-level *numero uno*, Mahathir's political leaning had decidedly swerved towards the right, reflecting his cautious attitude towards economic and political liberalisation began by Abdullah and continued, albeit more eclectically, by Najib Razak. When controversy arose over the allegedly racist training modules used by the Biro Tatanegara (BTN), Mahathir defended the modules to the extent of getting dragged into a public altercation with Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Nazri Aziz who labelled Mahathir a "racist". By officially consenting to his appointment as Malay right-wing NGO Pertubuhan Pribumi Perkasa Malaysia (PERKASA) led by the flamboyant Pasir Mas member of Parliament Ibrahim Ali, Mahathir injected confidence in the cause of UMNO conservatives and other Malay NGOs increasingly wary of the government's liberal policies. Mahathir's endorsement became their strongest legitimising counter force against what they saw as concerted efforts to erode Malay-Muslim hegemony. Mahathir openly urged Najib Razak not to brush aside PERKASA's views. Najib Razak consequently felt compelled to dilute *laissez faire* aspects of the New Economic Model (NEM) unravelled in March 2010 (Tan, 2010). As a countervailing measure, Najib Razak revived UMNO's traditional pro-Malay agenda by founding the Unit Peneraju Agenda Bumiputera (TERAJU) (*Free Malaysia Today*, 2011). The Merdeka Centre finding in April 2010 that a staggering 70% of Malays backed PERKASA was probably more indicative of their looking up to

Mahathir as their voice of conscience rather than an overt sign of rising ethnocentrism (*The Malaysian Insider*, 2010). Gone were the days of his *Bangsa Malaysia* rhetoric which was an integral component of his *Wawasan 2020* (Vision 2020) grandiose scheme promulgated in 1991.

Still, Najib Razak vacillated over whether or not to distance himself from Mahathir's increasingly ultra-nationalist posture. He fully realised that notwithstanding Mahathir's unpredictable political antics, he derived enormous benefit from Mahathir's persuasive influence over ordinary Malay-Muslims on such issues as the alleged moral depravity of Anwar Ibrahim. Bearing in mind Najib Razak's own "happy go lucky" ways in his younger days, he was handicapped to rebuke Anwar on his alleged sexual escapades. Najib Razak restricted himself to criticising Anwar on his over-ambitious policy and unrealistic reform programme. Mahathir, however, filled the lacuna by raising the contentious issues of not only Anwar's alleged extra-marital misdeeds but also Anwar's alleged role as an agent of foreign powers intent on instituting regime change in Malaysia. Although such speculation was potentially threatening to Malaysia's relations with the United States of America (USA), Najib Razak declined to stop Mahathir's tirade on account of its sway over the mostly rural Malay-Muslim folk bracing for the upcoming GE13. His silence was counterbalanced by cordial official liaisons with the USA, as portrayed in the visits to Malaysia by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and two high-profile senators John McCain and Joe Lieberman (*The Star*, 2012). Even alternative media outlets used judiciously by Mahathir to chide Abdullah such as *Malaysiakini* did not escape his flak as supposedly foreign-funded lackeys. George Soros, the financier-cum-philanthropist with whom Mahathir appeared to have reconciled in 2006, reclaimed his unsavoury role in Mahathir's diatribes as the ultimate villain responsible for conspiring to ruin Malaysia's political economy. This was reminiscent of Mahathir's singling him out as the scoundrel who brought about misery to Southeast Asian economies in 1997–1998.

From its outset, the GE13 hustings was a showcase of Mahathir's re-invigorated public role and influence. The impact of Mahathir's approbation of PERKASA, for instance, was telling. Regardless of Najib Razak's apparent promotion of moderation through his "1Malaysia" scheme and Global Moderate Movement, voters were sent the wrong signal with the Prime Minister's endorsement of PERKASA Deputy President, Zulkifli Nordin, to contest as BN-UMNO's candidate for the Shah Alam parliamentary seat against Khalid Samad, a PAS leader touted to be an important member of its pro-Anwar Ibrahim "Erdogan faction". Zulkifli had until recently been embroiled in a controversy over his purported statement belittling the Hindu religion which went viral over the Internet, to which he responded that it had been issued during the days he was active in PAS (*The Malaysian Insider*, 2013d). In another case attributed to Mahathir's interference, PERKASA President Ibrahim Ali was given the leeway to defend his Pasir Mas parliamentary seat, which he won in 2008 on a PAS-

friendly ticket, in a one-to-one fight against the PAS challenger, Nik Abduh, son of long-time Kelantan chief minister-cum-PAS *Mursyid al-'Am* (General Guide) Nik Aziz Nik Mat. In spite of having earlier received Mahathir's approval as a candidate, Ibrahim Ali's obnoxious reputation as a Malay supremacist was obviously too much for Najib Razak to swallow. Hence, rather than risking BN-UMNO's image for fielding an ultra-Malay firebrand as its official candidate, Najib Razak appeared to have furtively consented to BN-UMNO candidate Che Johan Che Pa's astounding failure to submit his nomination papers, so that Che Johan's candidacy became automatically nullified. So appeased was Mahathir with the tacit understanding arrived at with Najib Razak that he even expressed willingness to defend Che Johan should Che Johan be referred to the UMNO Disciplinary Committee (*The Malaysian Insider*, 2013c). Besides his conspicuous defence of PERKASA candidates, Mahathir also actively campaigned in Gelang Patah and Putrajaya in support of out-going Chief Minister of Johor Abdul Ghani Othman and Tengku Adnan Tengku Mansor respectively. In his typically caustic style, Mahathir accused DAP supremo Lim Kit Siang of inciting racial animosity by contesting in Gelang Patah in a bid to penetrate the BN stronghold state of Johor; the paradoxical fact that Mahathir himself was patron to the ethnocentric PERKASA being inconsequential to him. Putrajaya, whose parliamentary seat was vied by incumbent Tengku Adnan and Kelantan PAS strongman Husam Musa, was symbolically important for Mahathir who regarded himself as the founder of Malaysia's new administrative capital.

Heavily contributing to the pre-GE13 re-Mahathirisation were mainstream newspapers. Apart from *Utusan Malaysia* which we have identified as Mahathir's long-standing apologist, the liberal *New Straits Times* also moved to the right of the political spectrum. Catering to mainly middle class Malaysians, one of its favourite aspersions against Anwar Ibrahim and his opposition front were their alleged links with USA-based elements trying to effect regime change in Malaysia. For example, an article written by *Russia Today* columnist Nile Bowie speculated on the nefarious connections between Anwar and USA-government backed foundations which had purportedly funnelled millions worth of funds to Malaysia's opposition groupings (Bowie, 2012). Bowie and Michel Chossudovsky are among prominent thinkers who constantly provide intellectual input to Mahathir in his capacity as President of the Perdana Global Peace Foundation. Chossudovsky is himself founder-editor of the Centre for Research and Globalisation (CRG), a Canadian-based think tank infamous for producing polemical ideas heavily critical of the USA via its website at <http://www.globalresearch.ca>. In CRG's assessment, the results of GE13 favouring BN dented the USA's plans to install its proxy government in Malaysia (Cartalucci, 2013).

Yet another campaign strategy pursued by the mainstream press was the highlighting of the outpouring of apologies from individuals who had hurt Mahathir before in whatever capacity. Among them were the PKR renegade

Zulkifli Nordin, PAS member Zainon Ismail who had reputedly once plotted to kill Mahathir, and former Kedah Chief Minister Mahadzir Khalid who sided categorically with Abdullah during his war of words with Mahathir. In the context of Kedah, Mahathir's hegemonic hold over UMNO came close to completing a full circle with Najib Razak's pre-emptive announcement that Mukhriz Mahathir would be appointed Chief Minister if BN-UMNO managed to wrest power from PR-PAS in GE13, despite the fact that in the Kedah UMNO hierarchy, Mukhriz was only second in command to Ahmad Bashah Md. Hanipah. Following BN-UMNO's eventual triumph in Kedah, as a consolation, Kedah UMNO chief Ahmad Bashah, who did not contest a parliamentary seat, was appointed a Senator and Deputy Minister in the Prime Minister's Department. By late July, on Najib Razak's insistence, Ahmad Bashah and Mukhriz Mahathir had changed positions at the apex of Kedah UMNO's leadership, thus sealing re-Mahathirisation in Mahathir's home state (*The Star Online*, 2013).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

By coincidence, as GE13 neared, former British Prime Minister from the Conservative Party (1979–1990), Margaret Thatcher, died. Not only was the Iron Lady greatly admired by Mahathir Mohamad, who modelled a lot of his policies in accordance with Thatcher's precepts, but the striking similarities between both leaders' manipulative tactics, subterfuge, ruthlessness and shrewdness seldom fail to escape the attention of perspicacious analysts (cf. Hilley, 2001: 83–84). Both Thatcher and Mahathir proved the efficacy of the use of hard power in governance as opposed to using soft power, as done by their respective successors, John Major and Abdullah Badawi. To a large chunk of under-privileged Britons, Thatcher remained unpopular as the leader who caused untold misery to millions who suffered the debilitating effects of the massive de-industrialisation that took place during her tenure. After John Major's uneventful one term (1992–1997), the Conservative Party had to endure almost 13 years in the doldrums before finally being voted back into power in May 2010, and even then could form a government only in coalition with the centre-left Liberal Democratic Party. While BN's decline has not reached the extent of it having to relinquish power, results of GE13 were still a great blow to it. Not only was its popular vote tally of 47% lower than PR's 51%, but its share of seats in Parliament also slightly declined from 140 out of 219 in 2008 to 133 out of 222 in 2013. BN's recapture of Kedah was not so much due to any Mahathir-related factor, but rather owed much to internal disunity within Kedah PAS's ranks. Furthermore, in places where Mahathir made a conspicuous appearance in aid of the BN election machinery such as Shah Alam, Pasir Mas and Lumut, BN lost heavily. Mahathir's divisive and combative approach in managing communal

relations repelled the large majority of ethnic Chinese voters from BN – a tendency which shows no sign of subsiding months after the GE13 (cf. *Malaysiakini*, 2013). To be fair to UMNO, some of its notables did admit, once the outcome of GE13 became clear, that the Mahathir factor did significantly account for further erosion of support to BN (*The Malaysian Insider*, 2013a). Mahathir himself, unlike after GE12, refrained from making statements for quite some time, before expressing disappointment at BN's declining performance under Najib Razak and speculating on the possibility of Najib Razak being challenged in the oncoming UMNO General Assembly (*The Malaysian Insider*, 2013b).

Although Mahathir has in all likelihood become a liability to BN and UMNO, it seems very unlikely that Najib Razak will take the radical step of marginalising Mahathir for the ruling coalition's and party's own good. For all the pressure put upon Najib Razak ensuing from GE13, it has been argued that UMNO actually gained in strength, as indicated by its rise in the number and share of seats garnered (from 79 out of 117 contested seats in 2008 to 88 out of 120 contested seats in 2013), notwithstanding the skewed nature of its voting bank, heavily biased towards rural Malays (Chin, 2013). Indeed, the risk of dumping or even ignoring Mahathir may be too big for Najib Razak to take in terms of his own survival in the party. For all of his ethnocentric rantings and prejudices, Mahathir does wield significant clout over the rural Malay population. In spite of Najib Razak appealing to race-transcending national sentiments via his "1Malaysia" scheme, at the end of the day UMNO remains a Malay party utterly reliant on Malay votes. With a political career spanning 40 years, Mahathir understands this. In his judgement, as long as the Malaysian party system is negotiated through ethnic lenses, UMNO leaders can never afford to extricate themselves from racial politics. On the contrary, some like Mahathir thrive on it. In desperate circumstances, racial politics provide a lifeline to UMNO and its leaders, regardless of its negative consequences in terms of ethno-communal polarisation. In appeasing Mahathir, Najib Razak has had to negotiate a split identity: between being a Malaysian first or a Malay first. When societal fragmentation reaches a troublesome level, he can always resort to Mahathir-like strategies to silence critics and cow the opposition, as he has already done, though not as wantonly as Mahathir had. Instances of this are the post-GE13 detentions of opposition activists under the Sedition Act, the crackdown on PR's media organs, and the barring of PKR Vice President Nurul Izzah Anwar from visiting Sabah.

As long as the 88-year old Mahathir remains intellectually agile and physically fit, he will continue to cast a shadow over Malaysian politics, for better or for worse. De-Mahathirisation attempts by his successors have until now been futile, leading instead to internal contradictions and conflicts in a party system in which Mahathir had played a pivotal role in institutionalising. Unwinding the legacy of Mahathir would necessitate severing the convoluted

nexuses binding together UMNO politicians, Malay grassroots activists and Malay-Muslim NGOs. A few months after GE13, the political equilibrium arising from Mahathir-built frameworks and resultant structures does not appear to be in danger of collapsing. On the contrary, the overall political paradigm of which Mahathir and Mahathirism are integral parts, has ossified to a worrying degree which threatens race relations and national harmony.

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