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Columns

SUNDAY COLUMN: And who, really, is demonising whom?

11 Jun 2006

[Kalimullah Hassan](#)
TUN Dr Mahathir Mohamad says his criticisms of the current administration and his successor Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi are "not personal".

His son, Umno Youth executive council member Datuk Mukhriz Mahathir, is upset that ministers and others have criticised Dr Mahathir and says that what his father raised "was rational, so answer rationally".

And Dr Mahathir, ever the master strategist, has made his pre-emptive strike, predicting that "for the next 10 days, there will be lots of stories in the papers trying to demonise me, make me appear bad ...".

Therefore, if anybody criticises Dr Mahathir, then his prediction will come true — they are trying to demonise him.

The truth is that when Dr Mahathir retired, he was held in high esteem. People wished him well.

For the last two and a half years since his retirement, everyone, even his enemies, has treated him with kid gloves, not wanting to hurt his feelings because they all respected him and because he said he had retired.

So had my family and I, we had the greatest of respect.

When The Star's deputy editor-in-chief Datuk Wong Chun Wai wrote that Dr Mahathir could have done more about wiping out graft when he was prime minister, he was swiftly shut up by criticisms from Dr Mahathir, and even Umno Youth president Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein.

Wong wrote in The Star that he sought a meeting with Dr Mahathir and apologised.

When Dr Mahathir attacked International Trade and Industry Minister Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz over the Approved Permits (AP) issue, her belligerent defence of herself was pounced on by Umno members.

And then deputy minister Datuk Zainuddin Maidin demanded that Rafidah apologise to Dr Mahathir.

But everyone knew that the AP policy had been contentious since its inception and that it was Dr Mahathir who appointed Rafidah as minister in charge of APs in 1987 and kept her there for the remainder of his 16 years in power.

Still, Rafidah sought to show her regrets by hugging Dr Mahathir and crying at the National Day parade last year.

From then on, Dr Mahathir criticised many Government actions, such as the decision to raise the price of oil after it doubled within a year to US\$70 per barrel (which almost every country in the world had done), on Proton, on the National Automotive Policy.

The Government gave explanations but to little avail.

Proton chairman Datuk Azlan Hashim failed to get an appointment with Dr Mahathir to explain the decisions.

Yet, all those at the receiving end exercised restraint. Out of respect. Out of a desire not to hurt Dr Mahathir's feelings. Out of a wish to ensure his image as an elder statesman was preserved.

Then came the Cabinet decision to call off building the crooked bridge to Singapore.

Dr Mahathir unleashed the full force of his fury, and once again, a scenario the country had seen repeatedly during his 23 years of power was played out again.

Scathing remarks and provocative statements intended to provoke an equal and opposite reaction were made, like "half-past six Government with no guts", "selling out the country", "giving up the country's sovereignty".

Yet, again, restraint. Restraint. Restraint.

When former Foreign Ministry secretary-general Tan Sri Fuzi Abdul Razak replied rationally, point for point, Dr Mahathir dismissed his answers as "rambling".

It was still not good enough.

His adviser, former politician Tan Sri Abdullah Ahmad, arranged an interview with Malaysiakini, the Internet news site which he disliked with a passion when Dr Mahathir was prime minister.

Even then, despite Dr Mahathir's scathing remarks, Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi exercised what former deputy prime minister Tun Musa Hitam describes as "an elegant silence".

The Prime Minister was in Japan shortly after the Malaysiakini article appeared and was told that Dr Mahathir wanted to come and

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see him.

Abdullah, in the midst of breakfast with aides and officials, immediately put on his tie and told the ambassador that he would go and see his ex-boss rather than let Dr Mahathir come down and see him.

Yet, less than two weeks later, Dr Mahathir invited the foreign Press to his office and lambasted Abdullah and his administration.

He accused the current administration and Abdullah of many things — stabbing him in the back, ingratitude, and perhaps, the most provocative suggestion was that while he (Dr Mahathir) had no power to remove Abdullah, he said "it is for his own party (Umno) to remove him".

This time, the reaction that Dr Mahathir wanted came — from Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak to members of the Cabinet, mentris besar and chief ministers, the public and even some opposition parties.

They backed Abdullah and reminded Dr Mahathir that while he may have chosen Abdullah as his successor, the Prime Minister's mandate came from the electorate which in 2004 voted in the current administration with the most popular margin in Malaysian history.

It is admirable for Mukhriz to display filial piety but what is the rationale for his father accusing the whole Cabinet of treason?

That's what it really is when you say they sold out the country, that they are a Government with no guts, that they acted against the nation's interests.

Was any thought given to how this would go down with investors and foreign Governments dealing with this administration?

What is the rationale for accusing the Prime Minister, who has never shown any disrespect to him, of ingratitude, of stabbing him in the back, and of suggesting that Abdullah can be removed by Umno?

Sure, Mukhriz feels hurt. Which son or daughter would want to see his or her father criticised?

What about the sons and daughters of the people accused of selling out their own country? How would they feel?

Several times since the crooked bridge was called off, Dr Mahathir has accused me of masterminding what he perceives as a "blackout" of him in the Press, not only in the New Straits Times group of which I am deputy chairman, but also in other mainstream media.

At a couple of Press conferences, he joked about my name, saying that the media was controlled by a Hindu God (Kali) and a Muslim priest (Mullah).

Some guys thought it was witty and laughed with him.

Go do a Google search, type: "Meaning of Kalimullah".

The answer you get is: Musa is the Arabic name of the Prophet Moses. He is also referred to by the title Kalimullah meaning "He who spoke with Allah". Musa is one of the prophets of Islam.

Doesn't sound so funny or witty now, does it? Making fun of the prophets never is.

I am no prophet. I have all the imperfections and weaknesses of a mere mortal.

But as God is my witness, the accusations against me are false.

I did not respond although I was hurt. I did not respond when my 18-year-old daughter called me from Australia, crying, asking whether I was in trouble.

I did not respond because I reasoned that Dr Mahathir was angry the crooked bridge had been called off and that he was lashing out: and because he was someone I once had great respect for.

But I did wonder: Why me?

Dr Mahathir says it again and again, never checking whether his accusations are true.

Tells you something, doesn't it?

So do I tell my children that making fun of their father's name and accusing him of things he did not do is rational?

Just like accusing the Cabinet of selling out their country. What is so rational about that?

And who, really, is demonising whom?

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