

Malaysian leader beats challenge

by Mary McCourt

Although Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Mahathir Mohamad held on to the leadership of his country's ruling United National Malay Organization (UMNO) in strongly contested party elections in April, the party which has led the country since independence from Britain in 1957 remains deeply split. The April 24 election, which Mahathir won by the narrowest of margins—43 votes out of 1,500 cast at the party's national convention—was the first in some 40 years in which a party president, who has always then led the country as prime minister, has been seriously challenged.

Prime Minister Mahathir defeated his challenger, Trade and Industry Minister Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, 761-718. Mahathir's ally, Deputy Prime Minister Ghafar Baba, beat former Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Musa Hitam, Mahathir's strongest critic, for the post of UMNO deputy president, by a margin of only 40 votes. But Mahathir's supporters did win enough of the key positions in the party leadership to enable him to fire the two opposition leaders and several other cabinet ministers a few days after the election.

With Mahathir's victory, a serious challenge mounted by the international malthusians and bankers who backed his opponents has been at least temporarily fought off. For now, Malaysia will continue to pursue policies of economic and population growth.

Attention is already focused on the next party elections in 1990, which is also the year in which the New Economic Policy (NEP), adopted in 1970, must be renewed. Malaysia now faces great problems due to the international financial crisis, which has cut the nation's growth from almost 8% in 1980 to less than 1% last year. The prices of the commodities in which Malaysia is so rich—tin, palm oil, oil, and rubber—have collapsed, and drug use in the population has soared as the international drug mafias, facing a glut in the U.S. market, have pushed heroin consumption throughout Asia. The weakening economy raises the spectre of renewed racial troubles between the two largest population groups, Malay (48%) and Chinese (34%). And in the midst of all this, Islamic fundamentalism is rearing its ugly head.

The deep division in UMNO is something new, and dangerous. In the full 30 years since independence, the party has led Malaysia in the most stable government among the ASEAN nations. Tengku Razaleigh, a prince of the Kelantan state royal family, worked closely with Mahathir for some 20 years, and Musa Hitam was his former deputy. The defection of this faction from Mahathir's commitment to national development and growth, to espousing the views of the bankrupt world banking structure, would have sold Malaysia down the river had Mahathir not won.

Hitam has been using the international press, which led the charge in the Aquino-IMF coup against Marcos in the Philippines, to undermine Mahathir internationally. The *International Herald Tribune* reported April 4 that Musa Hitam had accused Mahathir's government of misuse of power and money. "Political reporters who cannot say so in the government-controlled press draw parallels to the rule of Ferdinand E. Marcos in the Philippines and to President Suharto of Indonesia," the *Tribune* wrote. Musa said in a recent interview that Mahathir had cost Malaysia much-needed investment by his outspoken criticism of industrial powers for unfair treatment of the developing sector, and his criticism of Zionism and "Zionist-dominated" Western news organizations. Mahathir, committed to a "look East" policy toward Japan, has also told Malaysia to "buy British last," his assessment of the quality of British products.

Musa himself could have commanded little from his touted "foreign investors." The recommendations of a Jan. 31 survey on Malaysia by the London *Economist* are the same population-destroying policies forced on other developing-sector nations: cut imports, especially food, privatize aviation, ports, the telephone system, railways, and other industries, and cut the state payroll, which supports 25% of the population.

These policies could never go through unless Mahathir's leadership were broken. One key program is the New Economic Policy, inaugurated to end the causes of the deadly 1969 riots, to bring Malays from owning some 4% of industry to a more equitable position. At the time of independence, the Malaysian economy was 97% owned by huge British and Dutch-based corporations, and overseas Chinese. During the 1970s, the country bought out Dunlop rubber, the huge Sime Darby company which owned mines and plantations, and Royal Dutch Shell, bringing these industries more under national control.

In the last year, Malaysia has led a fighting war against drug consumption, by decreeing, and carrying out, the death penalty for all traffickers, no matter how small, no matter the color of their skin.

But probably most frightening to the nervous financiers of Wall Street, Basel, and the City of London is Mahathir's population policy, which the *Economist* called "alarming." He is committed to raising the country's population from its current small 15 million to 70 million by the year 2100. Just

prior to the mid-April Kuala Lumpur conference of the Interaction Council of Former World Statesmen and Leaders, dominated by the Socialist International's Helmut Schmidt, one of Schmidt's aides told a journalist in Europe that Mahathir was facing a significant internal political challenge, and would be forced to compromise on some of his policies, notably population growth. But Mahathir refused to accept the Interaction Council's recommendations for population reduction, the aide complained after the meeting.

Fundamentalism vs. nationalism

Those who could immediately profit the most from the UMNO split are the Muslim fundamentalists, who were shut out of the government when the Parti Islam won no seats in the last general election, but continue very active in the provinces. The French daily *Le Figaro* warned May 2 that Mahathir may well find himself walking on a razor's edge because of his party's split, having to seek the support of UMNO members likely to become closer to the fundamentalists.

The fundamentalists, most active among younger Malays on university campuses in the past decade, are playing a dirty game among Malaysia's racial divisions, which were fostered when the British colonialists brought in both Chinese and Indian workers for the plantations. The *Far Eastern Economic Review* Jan. 22 quoted Mohamad Abu Bakar, a lecturer at the University of Malaya, from his essay on Islam and nationalism: Nationalism directly contradicts the Muslim tenet that "one should submit to no authority other than Allah. . . . Now that the exponents of Islam are ascendant . . . the Malay attachment to nationalism may disappear completely."

An article in the April issue of the London-based Muslim Brotherhood publication, *Islamic World Review*, is quite explicit. "Muslims . . . are not so naive as to put their total trust in electoral processes of a secular-democratic variety. . . .

"One thing now is certain. . . . Mahathir has effectively silenced critics even from within his own party, and with his electoral win, one can only wait for more repression to come."

The "repressions" the Muslim Brotherhood decries include the "Memali incident" in November 1985, in which some 18 persons—four of them policemen—were killed after the police attacked a group of fundamentalists led by one Ibrahim Libya at Kampung Memali. "Memali was, and is, the substance of the Islamic movement," the *Islamic World Review* wrote.

The incident was used to undermine Mahathir at the UMNO party convention, with allegations that he ordered the attack. The incident occurred the day before he left Nov. 20, 1985 for a trip to China. During a speech April 12 opening the UMNO convention, in one of the predominantly Muslim states of Malaysia, Mahathir said, "This is the responsibility of the police, and their responsibility rests with the Home Affairs Minister." The Home Affairs Minister at the time was Datuk Musa Hitam.

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