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World News: Malaysia Rulers Fighting 'Dirty,' Mahathir Says

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DENGKIL, Malaysia -- The campaign to lead Malaysia is turning testy as the May 9 election approaches, suggesting the vote will do little to bridge the divisions characterizing this prosperous, Muslim-majority nation.

The newly minted opposition leader, 92-year-old former Premier Mahathir Mohamad, on Tuesday accused the government of systematically sabotaging his alliance.

"Their goal is to win, but not in a clean fight, in a dirty fight," Dr. Mahathir said at a campaign stop in Dengkil, a town south of Kuala Lumpur.

As an example of alleged government interference, Dr. Mahathir accused government supporters of tampering with a plane he had chartered to take him to a rally last weekend. He ended up using a plane provided by a friend.

The Civil Aviation Authority Malaysia denied that the plane had been sabotaged and said it couldn't take off because air had leaked from one of the front tires.

Responding to the accusation, Deputy Prime Minister Ahmad Zahid Hamidi said Dr. Mahathir has lost little flair for the drama that characterized his years in power. He suggested Dr. Mahathir would admit himself to a hospital on election day to win sympathy votes. "I hope that voters will not fall victim to this," Mr. Ahmad Zahid said.

The claims and rebuttals reflect the tensions of the five-week campaign, which was preceded by last-minute redistricting that the opposition said could enable the ruling National Front coalition to eke out a majority in Parliament even if it finishes far behind in the vote. The National Front has led every government since independence in 1957.

The government also pushed through a law in April making the publication of fake news punishable by up to six years in prison, which critics say could inhibit debate. The government rejects that either move was intended to tip the elections.

The campaign is raising questions about the strength of democracy in a country that has taken a more authoritarian turn and, like neighbors in Southeast Asia, has been building closer ties to China, said James Chin, head of the Asia Institute at the University of Tasmania in Australia.

Political fractures have deepened in the resource-rich nation, with the government doubling down on its core support among the majority ethnic-Malay Muslim population that dominates rural areas while the opposition courts a wealthier, more multiracial following in the cities.

Dr. Mahathir is attempting to defeat his former protege, Prime Minister Najib Razak, whom he accuses of skimming money from a scandal-dogged state investment fund, 1Malaysia Development Bhd., or 1MDB.

1MDB and Mr. Najib have denied wrongdoing and said they would cooperate with any lawful international investigation. Multiple Malaysian investigations in Malaysia into 1MDB closed without finding wrongdoing.

During his authoritarian rule from 1981 to 2003, Dr. Mahathir centralized power and blocked his rivals. When his deputy, Anwar Ibrahim, challenged him for power, Dr. Mahathir had him arrested for sodomy, charges he denied.

As opposition torchbearer, Dr. Mahathir has pledged to hand power to Mr. Anwar, who is currently in prison on another disputed sodomy conviction.

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