

I have to be neutral: Dr M

08 AUG 1993

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KUALA LUMPUR: Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad will maintain a neutral stand in the event of a contest for the deputy president's post.

"I'm neutral. I have to be neutral. I cannot be seen to endorse any side," the Prime Minister said yesterday when asked to comment on speculations that Finance Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim might challenge incumbent Abdul Ghafar Baba.

In reiterating his advice for a no-contest for the post, Dr Mahathir said he had to remain neutral as he would have to reconcile the party's leadership machinery soon after the elections.

He said if he endorsed a candidate, the other candidate whom he did not support might be reluctant to listen to his advice if he won.

"In my opinion, it is better not to have any contest as a contest will, to a certain extent, cause some rift in the party,"

he said.

"I welcome Datuk Seri Anwar's announcement that he will not vie for the post but if he changes his mind, it is up to him. I cannot stop him."

Dr Mahathir described what was going on in the party as a misconception of what was allowed by the party's constitution and what was practised in Umno's tradition.

Asked if a solution or compromise could be reached between Ghafar and Anwar, he replied: "What solution? We don't have any problem, so why

should there be any compromise or anything?"

Dr Mahathir said he failed to understand why people were excited over the speculation of a contest.

Earlier, when he opened the 40th MIC general assembly, he stressed the importance of choosing capable leaders.

"If we choose wrongly, change leaders at our whims and fancies, or choose an individual to cater to his ambition, we will lose out," he said. (See report on page 2)