

23/05/1997

Abu Zahar: Curbing social ills my priority (HL)

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KUALA LUMPUR, Thurs. - Merlimau Assemblyman Datuk Abu Zahar Isnin, named as the new Malacca Chief Minister this morning, has outlined the task of combating social ills involving youth as among his top priorities.

"This problem has become the talk of the town in the last few years, even among the leaders," said Abu Zahar, a former teacher and State deputy director of Education.

The selection of Abu Zahar, 58, the Works and Public Utilities committee chairman as the State's eighth Chief Minister, was announced by Acting Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim at the Prime Minister's Department.

Abu Zahar will be sworn in tomorrow.

Anwar said the Yang di-Pertua Negeri Tun Syed Ahmad Shahabudin had agreed to the appointment, which had also been endorsed by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who is now on two months' leave.

"I am confident he will be able to continue his excellent service in developing Malacca, besides his appointment as the State Umno liaison committee chairman," said Anwar.

Anwar also expressed confidence that Abu Zahar, who had once served as the State Legislative Assembly Speaker, would receive support from all assemblymen and the people of Malacca.

However, Anwar did not say whether the new Chief Minister had also been appointed the State Barisan Nasional chairman, a post normally held by Chief Ministers and Menteri Besar in States ruled by BN.

Saying he could not attend to any questions, Anwar left the Press conference which only lasted a few minutes.

In Malacca, Abu Zahar, in outlining his main agenda which will see the introduction of more religious programmes to help overcome social ills, said he would also ensure that Malacca would achieve its target of becoming a developed State by year 2000.

Abu Zahar, succeeds Mohd Zin who died of a stroke on May 14, is the State's third Chief Minister within the last three years.

Mohd Zin assumed the post following the resignation of Tan Sri Rahim Tamby Chik in October 1994.

"I will continue with whatever that has been started by my predecessor. But if there is a need for any revision, then it will be looked into," said Abu Zahar, who was informed of his appointment by Anwar via telephone about 9am today.

Expressing his gratitude to Dr Mahathir and Anwar for the trust and confidence they have placed in him, he said he would do his best to ensure that the mandate given to him would be carried out effectively.

On combating social ills, Abu Zahar said youths must have a strong religious conviction and better understanding of Islam to avoid being affected by negative and unhealthy influences.

"I hope we can introduce more religious programmes for the young so that the problem can be reduced, if not overcome," he said.

He added that although religious education was readily available, it had not been given that much-needed emphasis. "I will see that this is done," he said.

If the people understand their religion better, he added, the problem could be addressed.

To a question, Abu Zahar, who is also Jasin Umno division head, said he

would try to bridge the gap, if there was any, between the party's branches and divisions.

"Internal problems or differences in views are normal in any party. But I hope to foster closer ties between the members for the sake of the party, stability and unity."

On his appointment, he said he never expected to be selected. "I read a few of the speculative pieces in the newspapers which mentioned me and other Exco members. But I never took them seriously until Anwar called me this morning," he said.

The selection of Abu Zahar did not come as a surprise as he is one of the most senior Exco members having served as the State Assembly Speaker (1986-1994) and Agriculture and Rural Development committee chairman (1994-1995).

He is seen as a candidate who will be accepted by all parties.

Born on Sept 14, 1939 in Kampung Merlimau Pasir, Malacca, he is married to Datin Khalijah Mohd Jiddi and they have six children.

Apart from leading the Umno Jasin division, he was appointed the party's State liaison committee treasurer in January, taking over from his uncle, Umno veteran Datuk Abdul Aziz Tapa.

In September 1995, Jasin MP and former Deputy Prime Minister Tun Ghafar Baba lost to Abu Zahar in the contest for the Umno Jasin divisional head's post. Abu Zahar received 127 votes while Ghafar obtained 121 votes.

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