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Mahathir-Successor (News Analysis)
MAHATHIR AND THE NAMING OF HIS SUCCESSOR

By: Azman Ujang

KUALA LUMPUR, Sept 8 (Bernama) -- Over the past one week, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has at least on three occasions found it necessary to repeat that his deputy Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim will succeed him if he steps down.

Why he needs to do so is a matter of conjecture, but it is somewhat obvious that to his mind, the more he mentions about it, the more rumours are floated about "problems" between him and his deputy.

This is despite the many times both men have come out to deny that there is any rift between them, especially by Anwar who has often pledged his undivided loyalty to his boss.

And yesterday at the end of the Umno general assembly, Dr Mahathir, who is the Umno president, once again spoke on the succession issue.

Though he has indicated this elsewhere, it was the first time that he made the endorsement of Anwar in front of over 1,900 delegates in a full general assembly.

Dr Mahathir's latest reference to his successor came in the wake of talk in the stock market last week that Anwar was quitting as Finance Minister.

The prime minister quickly nailed the rumours, even saying that the rumour-mongers "should be shot".

The quit rumour came in the wake of a briefing by the prime minister to media editors during which he announced several measures to prop up the stock market which was then coming under intense selling pressure by foreign fund managers.

It was not helped either by news reports that it was the government's Economic Adviser Tun Daim Zainuddin and not Anwar, who met foreign fund managers last week for a heart-to-heart talk, a meeting which led to the market recovery on Friday.

But according to the head of a Malaysian think-tank, Abdul Razak Abdullah Baginda, what Dr Mahathir did was to come out in Anwar's defence, given the "crisis" in the currency and stock markets as well as the poison pen letters with allegations of a sex scandal against Anwar.

"What Dr Mahathir did was to reassure especially the foreign investors that there is no change in the top leadership and that there is going to be a smooth transition of power in Malaysia when he steps down," said Abdul Razak, who is executive director of the Malaysian Strategic Research Centre.

He said such reassurance was necessary because there had been talk of "differences of opinion" between Dr Mahathir and Anwar, including on ways to handle the country's economic woes, brought out by attacks on the ringgit and the stock market by foreign manipulators.

"I think Dr Mahathir has sent a strong message that all is well between him and Anwar and I am confident this will help the currency and stock markets to recover," he said.

But Prof Dr Syed Hussein Alatas of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia said this was the first time in Malaysia's history that the question of succession had been talked about so much.

He said: "Actually, to me it's a non-issue. Whoever is the deputy president of Umno at the time the prime minister leaves office, will be appointed the prime minister".

"Perhaps it was due to this that all the previous three prime

ministers did not bother to talk about this in the same fashion as it is being done now but yet there was a smooth change-over of prime ministership", recalled Dr Syed Hussein.

He said that to him, the most important point about the issue of succession was the "condition" under which Dr Mahathir had repeatedly said he would like to hand over to his successor.

" Even yesterday, he again said that he would like to hand over the party intact to his successor," Dr Syed Hussein said.

To quote Dr Mahathir: " I do not want to see the party divided into factions or halved into the president's and the deputy president's teams. I do not want my successor to inherit only half of Umno just because he cannot get the full support of members".

Dr Syed Hussein said given the past history of Umno where leaders had their own teams or camps, this was yet another strong message from Dr Mahathir to Anwar and other leadership aspirants in Umno.

That he has to underline the importance of his would be successor's acceptability to Umno leaders and members tallies with Dr Mahathir's reckoning of his position as Umno president being more important than that of being prime minister.

He stressed this point in a recent interview with Asiaweek magazine.

" How do you see your role as head of Umno. Some say it is more important than being prime minister," he was asked.

" Yes, I depend on my party. Because without my party, I am nothing. And I also consider my speech to Umno every year as the most important speech that I give, because it sets the tone of the party," replied Dr Mahathir.

But both think-tanker Abdul Razak and Dr Syed Hussein said the big question about the succession issue is when Dr Mahathir will step down.

The prime minister himself has been asked this question many times, both at home and abroad, the last time being his interview over CNN on Tuesday.

And his answer to this remains as consistent as his views on most other issues -- " I will retire when the time comes".-- BERNAMA

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