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PM deserves credit for Proton success: Anwar

Kamarul Yunus

CREDIT for the national car's success belongs to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, says Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim said.

Dr Mahathir not only mooted the idea but followed it aggressively to ensure the success of the project, he said.

Anwar added that he would not brush aside the contributions of others in the project, including the past management of Perusahaan Otomobil Nasional Bhd (Proton). "Of course, we cannot deny the fact that there were others who helped.

"But the Prime Minister has been consistently involved and (is) responsible in the development of Proton.

"Thus, it was appropriate for Tan Sri Yahaya Ahmad (DRB-Hicom chairman) to give due recognition and honour to Dr Mahathir during the official roll-out of Proton's one millionth car recently," he told reporters after opening the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka's 1997 annual gathering in Kuala Lumpur yesterday.

Nevertheless, Anwar, who is also Finance Minister, said the contributions from the past management and Proton pioneers were given due recognition by the Government and the existing Proton management.

"Based on Dr Mahathir's speech, he also acknowledged the contributions from all who had contributed either in the past or present. In fact, Yahaya had also invited all Proton's former board members as well as its workers to the roll-out of Proton one millionth car.

"Thus, it is not correct to say the recognition was not given to the pioneers," he said, adding that a recent newspaper article had made this "incorrect" assessment.

Anwar said the article seemed to suggest that the past management and those who had contributed towards Proton project were not given due recognition.

"Actually, nobody should deny the fact that the idea to produce Proton was mooted by Dr Mahathir. The Prime Minister himself is devoted to the project, monitoring every activity such as those concerning the designs and facilities, and to the extent, he bring these to his home and office," he added.

Anwar said Dr Mahathir even urged Cabinet ministers to buy Proton cars to instil confidence in the public because when the project was launched, there were numerous criticisms against the national car.

He also defended the government's move to hand over the management of Proton to Yahaya, saying that there have been some changes following the takeover.

"While we had to wait for 10 years to produce one million cars, the new management has set the goal to produce the second million in four years.

"The new management is also stressing lowering imports of components for Proton cars as well as increasing export capability of up to 40 per cent within one or two years," he added.

With the takeover of Britain's Lotus International Group by Proton and Yahaya, Anwar said he believes the synergy and capability as well as the Lotus expertise can be of assistance to Proton.

"Of course, Yahaya is now the prime mover of the company. He has pledged to ensure efficiency, reduce production cost, increase export capacity and to meet customer requirements more speedily.

"He (Yahaya) will also keep the Government and the Prime Minister fully informed as well as contributing ideas and giving ideas.

"The new management has managed to increase the efficiency level, reduce cost, give assurance to continue to organise the vendor scheme to distribute the wealth to the small companies, and increase export," he said, adding that all these factors should be taken into consideration.

He said the Government evaluates the performance of hundreds of companies that it had handed over the management.

"The achievement will always be based on their performance after taking over the operations of the company involved. But this does not mean that the past management of Proton was weak and slow.

"The fact is that after taking over, the capacity and capability of the company have been far better," he added.

Although Anwar did not mention the newspaper article, it is believed that he was referring to the Other Thots column in the New Sunday Times on January 5.

In the article, the writer recalled the development of the Proton, its birth pangs, the contributions of its pioneers and the criticisms faced by the Government for starting the car project.

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