

08/09/1997

PM: Anwar my potential successor (HL)

Syed Nazri

KUALA LUMPUR, Sun. - Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today emphatically declared that Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim is his designated successor and firmly called for a stop to talk that his deputy is quitting.

The Prime Minister's assertion, though not his first on the subject in recent weeks, held extra meaning as it was made before a full Umno general assembly during his adjournment speech.

It also came at a time when rumours of an impending resignation abounded, fanned by negative reports of the country's economy and Anwar's alleged personal problems highlighted in poison pen letters.

"Although Anwar's goatee is a problem," Dr Mahathir said in jest in response to an earlier humorous remark made by Anwar, "he is still my deputy and he is my potential successor."

After loud applause, he continued: "I hope the applause is an endorsement of what I have just said."

Dr Mahathir came to the point after first taking a humorous dig at Anwar, who has been deputy since 1993, for keeping a goatee unlike him and his two previous deputies (Tan Sri Musa Hitam and Tun Ghafar Baba) who are clean-shaven.

He said some people would like to believe that all was not well between him and Anwar just because Anwar kept a pointed beard which the Prime Minister finds "disturbing".

The light banter livened the three-day assembly which was full of sombre speeches and relatively unexciting debate.

The party president reiterated that he would like to hand over the party intact to his successor, a point which he had often emphasised.

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

Dr Mahathir further spiced his speech by sharing his opinion on Muslim men who have positive ideas about the taking of more than one wife.

"But problems could still crop up with this practice," he said. "It is so difficult to maintain one wife, what more two or more. I still don't know how some men keep four wives. You look on the left, you see a problem, you look on the right, another problem, you look in front, one more problem. You look behind and there is still a problem."

Thanking delegates for expressing full support for him during the assembly, Dr Mahathir described the support as an endorsement not only of him but of his "team" in the Umno supreme council and the Cabinet.

"Too much praise can also cause problems because my head will swell and I have to get a bigger songkok each time," he quipped.

Drawing attention to the many queries about his youthful looks, most of which from people wanting to know his secret and what pills he was taking, Dr Mahathir said it had a lot to do with his lifestyle and the fact that he did not smoke nor drink.

However, he confessed that he did try out Kooa cigarettes during the Japanese occupation and Rough Rider after the end of World War II.

"I did not like the taste and have abhorred cigarettes ever since," he said.

The Prime Minister also reminded delegates about the importance of

adopting the right work culture which he said was a vital ingredient for success.

On religion, Dr Mahathir said it was not right to label anyone unIslamic just because of disagreement over certain issues.

He emphasised his belief that there should be priorities in furthering the cause of Islam and that the most important was to ensure that responsibilities for the development of Muslims were carried out.

"It is of no use if we make symbols our priority when we are not successful. Is the wearing of skullcaps and white songkok more important than the substance of the religion?" he asked.

Dismissing as untrue that he did not have any respect for the ulamak, Dr Mahathir said there were people who professed to be ulamak but they went about slandering and criticising others.

Dr Mahathir, who is also Home Minister, agreed to a suggestion by one of the speakers that Harakah, the official newspaper of Pas, be banned because of its slanderous and instigative contents.

Harakah, whose permit only allows it to be circulated internally, has already been banned from being sold in the streets.

"But this has been disregarded and we have been very lenient so far. This time, we will not allow it to be sold to the public anymore. We will take action if anyone is caught selling the newspaper from now. If the paper carries slanderous news, we will take them to court," he said.

Later, at a Press conference, Dr Mahathir said Harakah had never applied for a permit to sell the newspaper to the public.

"Shops selling the newspaper will be going against the law and we can take action against them," he said.

On whether the action would lead to the Government being branded as undemocratic, Dr Mahathir said: "Even now, they claim that we are not democratic."

Asked when the enforcement would take effect, Dr Mahathir said: "As soon as I give the order."

(END)