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Dr M to let party members decide on his deputy

KUALA LUMPUR, Thurs. - Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today he would leave it to party members to decide through the democratic process who the next Deputy Prime Minister would be.

"We have to give Umno members the opportunity to decide who the right candidate is.

"If I appoint a Deputy Prime Minister now, he will have the edge (for the post of deputy presidency) at next year's party elections," Dr Mahathir said after visiting the national hockey stadium and the national stadium at Bukit Jalil.

He said no one would act as head of Government should he go abroad.

In Johor Baru, Umno Johor Baru division chief Datuk Shahrir Abdul Samad urged the Prime Minister to appoint his deputy soon, adding that the post of Deputy Prime Minister should not be left vacant for too long.

He said the position was important as it would also determine the post of Umno deputy president.

"As the country gears itself to overcoming the economic downturn, the people, especially Umno members, need a suitable leader to help the party president.

"It has also been the tradition of Umno and the Government to always have a deputy by the side of the Prime Minister.

"We hope Dr Mahathir will find a Deputy Prime Minister soon," Shahrir told reporters last night after addressing a public assembly to explain why Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim was sacked from all his positions in the Government and from the party. Also present were Johor Baru Umno information chief Khaled Nordin and Tanjung Puteri State Assemblyman Mohamad Kasbi.

Shahrir, who once served as Social Welfare Minister in the Cabinet, said the post of Deputy Prime Minister should not be left vacant for too long as it gave the wrong impression there was no one competent enough to fill Anwar's shoes.

Anwar was removed from the Cabinet and sacked from Umno for alleged moral misconduct.

Shahrir said Umno's two vice-presidents Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak and Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, both had the credentials and experience to fill the post.

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