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'I had planned to hand over leadership to Anwar this year'

KUALA LUMPUR, Tues. - Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today he had planned to step down this year and hand over the country's leadership to Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, whom he had groomed to take over from him.

This was why when the Prime Minister had gone on a two-month leave last year, he had appointed Anwar as acting Prime Minister because he (Dr Mahathir) was confident that Anwar was capable of taking over the country's leadership.

Dr Mahathir said he had to put off his plans to retire following the country's economic problems.

He described his decision to remove Anwar as Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister as the "most unpleasant experience" in his 17-year career as Prime Minister.

Asked whether it was the most painful decision that he had made after taking office as Prime Minister, Dr Mahathir said:

"Well, I don't really know what kind of pain. I have no means of measuring the degree of pain. But certainly it was the most unpleasant experience."

He was speaking to reporters at the Putra World Trade Centre after briefing Umno divisional leaders on the reasons behind Anwar's sacking from all Government positions and expulsion from Umno.

Asked whether this was his worst-ever regret, Dr Mahathir said:

"Ever? I don't know. But I am sorry that it had come to this. I was thinking of retiring this year. I left the country last year and even gave him a chance to lead the country.

"And if not for the economic problems, I would have stepped down. Unfortunately, I think I need to stay back to lend some of my experience towards solving this problem."

Dr Mahathir said what was unacceptable was the fact that Anwar had not only indulged in immoral activities but at the same time portrayed himself as a very religious person and one who held strongly to the teachings of Islam."

"He even leads prayers besides reading the Friday sermon (khutbah). So what he did was against the image that he portrayed," Dr Mahathir said.

On whether he will also explain to the public why Anwar was sacked, Dr Mahathir said:

"I don't think I need to explain to Malaysians at large. I think over time, they will understand that what I say is based on facts.

"I don't do this to a person who was literally brought in by me, to succeed me ... a friend.

"Why should I do this to him? I have lots of enemies, I would like to do it to my enemies. I won't choose to do it to a friend.

"I also won't choose an accusation which is so difficult to explain and so difficult for people to accept.

"His credentials as a very religious person are good. I should have found some other excuse, but unfortunately there are no other excuses."

Dr Mahathir hoped that all quarters would now understand the reasons behind Anwar's removal from the Government and his expulsion from Umno.

On whether there was a possibility that Anwar would be reinstated, he said:

"No, not a hope."

On the large crowd that turns up at Anwar's residence every day, Dr Mahathir said Anwar was deliberately courting arrest under the Internal Security Act so that he would be regarded as a martyr.

"This will give him a lot of mileage. Certainly, it will give him a lot of publicity and of course, the government (will be accused) of being dictatorial, etc, etc ... which I am quite familiar with."

Dr Mahathir also said Umno leaders or members who frequent Anwar's residence and claim to be there in their personal capacity should be prepared to face the consequences if the people misconstrued the purpose of them being there.

To a question on whether Anwar was given the opportunity to defend himself, Dr Mahathir said:

"He had every opportunity to defend himself, unlike others whom he himself passed judgment on. He was head of the disciplinary committee and those whom he had disciplined, did not get the kind of opportunity he had."

"As far as this party is concerned, we had pushed aside many people who were eventually found not guilty."

"This is what happened to some of the leaders. They did something that the party did not approve. They were charged in court and found not guilty, but they are still not back in the party."

Dr Mahathir said Umno was even stricter than the courts.

The Prime Minister added that there were still a lot of very confused people on the ground who needed to be told about his briefing.

"And I am quite sure that they (those present today) will explain. I am also quite sure that there will be some die-hards who will never be convinced, but the majority will eventually be convinced."

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