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Mahathir - Anwar

MAHATHIR PLEDGES SUPPORT FOR ANWAR FOR UMNO NUMBER TWO POST

KUALA LUMPUR, June 19 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister and Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today he will support Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim if there is a contest for the Umno deputy presidency in next year's party elections.

"As far as I am concerned, if anybody contest against my deputy, then I will support my incumbent that is my present deputy," he told a news conference at the end of the first day of the 1998 Umno general assembly here.

Dr Mahathir said this when asked about the no-contest proposal by Umno delegates at the assembly today.

Anwar, who was also present at the news conference when asked if he would challenge Dr Mahathir for the top party post, said he had never said he will challenge the president.

"At no time did I make reference that I will challenge the president," said Anwar who is also Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister.

Anwar said he made specific mention of his support for Dr Mahathir in his speech when he simultaneously opened the Umno Youth and Wanita assemblies yesterday.

When asked again Anwar said: "The president has already clarified."

In his speech yesterday Anwar urged party members to stand united behind Dr Mahathir's leadership in overcoming the economic woes.

Dr Mahathir said he and Anwar shared the "same reply" to the no-contest proposal and Anwar endorsed this with a nod and said: "Yes, we discussed that."

The prime minister also said that he and Anwar would not prevent a contest for their respective posts.

"We feel that if people want to have a contest, by all means do," said Dr Mahathir.

Anwar said some foreign media had speculated that he would challenge Dr Mahathir for the top post.

On cronyism, the prime minister said he had spoken at length on the subject in his presidential address today.

On Umno Youth chief Datuk Ahmad Zahid Hamidi's statement yesterday that the prime minister's son and Umno Youth assistant treasurer Mokhzani Mahathir "is the movement's bridge with the party leadership", Dr Mahathir said he did not think Zahid had meant it that way.

"He (Zahid) is an Umno Supreme Council member. Therefore there's no need to use my son as a bridge. Other people may think this is a form of cronyism to use my son to influence me," said Dr Mahathir.

The prime minister said Zahid was free to raise any issue or seek clarification from him at the council's meetings.

Earlier, during debate on the presidential address, the delegate from Kedah Ismail Yaakub proposed no-contest for the two top party posts so as not to undermine party unity.

Ismail argued that allowing contest for the two posts could raise misconception of interference by the incumbents.

Lies and accusations through poison-pen letters about strained relationship between Dr Mahathir and Anwar were merely designed to weaken Umno and make its members lose confidence in the party, he added.

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