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Mahathir-DPM

MAHATHIR STILL CONSIDERING TO APPOINT DPM BEFORE UMNO POLLS

HANOI, Dec 17 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today he is still considering at the moment whether to appoint a new Deputy Prime Minister before the Umno elections next year.

"As I said (earlier), I wanted to let the party (Umno) to decide in the next party election, but certain people including senior members of the party have expressed the view that it is too long to wait," he said replying to a foreign reporter who asked when he would appoint a new deputy.

Dr Mahathir, who was on a four-day trip to Vietnam where he attended the just-concluded Sixth Asean Summit, said those calling for quick appointment of a new DPM feared that "anything might happen to me."

"This is something that they were always seemed to be worried about and therefore I should consider appointing earlier the deputy prime minister," Dr Mahathir said.

Umno is scheduled to hold party elections in June next year.

The suspense over who would be Malaysia's new deputy prime minister continued when, despite high expectations and rife speculation, Dr Mahathir did not name his deputy at last Sunday's Umno special general assembly in Kuala Lumpur to amend the party constitution.

Following that several quarters, including members of the Dewan Negara, Malaysia's Upper House, joined the chorus of those preferring a deputy prime minister be appointed without delay.

Their reasons, among other things, were that having a new DPM would do the country much good while reinforcing the masses confidence and that of the international community especially during the economic crisis.

Another reason was that by appointing a new DPM now, a possible scramble for the post later could be minimised.

The DPM post fell vacant following the expulsion of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim from the Cabinet last Sept 2 and from Umno the next day.

The local media and political observers had touted two incumbent Umno vice presidents, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak, also respectively Foreign and Education ministers as likely candidates along side former finance minister Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah.

Razaleigh, also a former Umno vice-president, left Umno to form the breakway Parti Semangat Melayu 46 (S46) but rejoined Umno upon S46 becoming defunct in October 1996.

At the press conference the prime minister was also asked why he had changed his mind about retiring this year.

"Well, initially I changed my mind because of the economic problems that the country was faced with.

Subsequently, he said, there was a problem following Anwar's dismissal.

"So, now I don't have a deputy to succeed me," he said.

Dr Mahathir said as such, he "cannot possibly step down in November this year."

-- BERNAMA

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