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Mahathir-Deputy

MAHATHIR TO CONSULT UMNO COLLEAGUES WHETHER TO APPOINT DEPUTY

KUALA LUMPUR, Sept 30 (Bernama) -- Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today he will have to consult his colleagues in Umno on whether to appoint a deputy prime minister before the party's election next year to replace Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim who was sacked on Sept 2.

At a news conference at his office here, the prime minister said although he had said earlier that he would not appoint a deputy until after the Umno polls, the question of appointing one now would be something he would have to consult other Umno leaders.

Dr Mahathir was asked about the possibility of the country experiencing political instability or not going through a smooth transition of power should anything happen to him now that there is no deputy prime minister.

" This is something I need to consult my Umno colleagues. I have a duty to consult them," said Dr Mahathir, who is also Umno president.

The Umno polls are not due till late next year and with Anwar, who was also Umno deputy president before being stripped of his party membership following his sacking, the party is now without a deputy president who traditionally also becomes deputy prime minister.

Dr Mahathir had previously said that he would not appoint a deputy now so as not to be seen to take sides among the party's vice presidents who are in line for the job.

He had also said that should anything happen to him, Umno, as the party with the largest representation in parliament, would have to choose a leader to be appointed prime minister.

Umno has three vice presidents -- Education Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak, Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and former Selangor Menteri Besar Tan Sri Muhammad Haji Muhammad Taib.

Muhammad is on leave from the party to sort out personal legal problems, leaving Najib and Abdullah in contention for the post.

At today's news conference meant only for the local media, the prime minister dropped hints about appointing a deputy after a reporter suggested that should anything happen to him, "there might be a political havoc because many Umno leaders would want to become prime minister".

He again spoke about his earlier plans to retire at the end of this year which had to be deferred because of the regional economic crisis.

Dr Mahathir, who has been prime minister for 17 years, said at 73 years old, it was time to retire which was why he had been grooming Anwar to take over.

He said Anwar was the most qualified to take over as prime minister but once he was convinced that his former deputy, who is now facing 10 charges of sodomy and corruption, was morally unfit for the job, he had to remove Anwar swiftly.

" I can't wait any longer because if anything happens to me, he would be prime minister of this country," he said.

In his characteristic frank way with words, Dr Mahathir said at 73 he could "drop dead" anytime, adding that "even younger people could also drop dead".

" I know this, having had one heart attack before," said the prime minister who had a heart attack in 1989 and underwent a by-pass operation.

-- BERNAMA

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