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`Umno party members will decide on DPM post'

UMNO president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said yesterday he would leave it to party members to decide through democratic process the appointment of Deputy Prime Minister.

"If I appoint a Deputy Prime Minister now, he will have the edge (for the post of deputy president at next year's party elections)," Dr Mahathir said after watching the Commonwealth Games' athletics, hockey and lawn bowl events in Kuala Lumpur yesterday.

The Prime Minister was asked on suggestions by Johor Baru Umno division chief Datuk Shahrir Abdul Samad that he appoint his deputy immediately to avoid further speculation. The post of Deputy Prime Minister was left vacant following the dismissal of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim from the government and party posts on September 2 and 3 respectively.

On who will take charge of the country when he is overseas, Dr Mahathir said no one would act as head of Government, adding that he foresees no problems when he leaves for Japan, a trip scheduled for next month.

"It is just for a short while. Previously, both Anwar (then Deputy Prime Minister) and myself had gone out of the country at the same time and there were no problems," he added.

Dr Mahathir was also asked on the nationwide roadshow by Anwar, and the evidence to prove the latter's innocence which was said to be kept at various places in the country and Indonesia.

"He (Anwar) is entitled to his opinion when campaigning in public, but he should not, prior to being produced in court, make claims that the courts are unfair.

"If he does have the necessary evidence to prove his innocence, he is welcome to produce them before the courts," he said, adding attempts by Anwar to cast aspersions on the judiciary and the police force are part of his strategy to discredit these institutions.

Describing such statements as Anwar's form of defence, Dr Mahathir said: "In the event he (Anwar) is found guilty, he would claim that the courts were unfair and that it was a conspiracy."

On Wednesday, Anwar had claimed that he had "black and white proof" that he was innocent.

To prevent the evidence from being seized by the police, Anwar claimed that they had been kept in 30 to 40 places in various parts of the country and also in Indonesia.

"Even if the evidence is kept abroad, he is entitled to produce them ... we don't have any problem. We have a due process of law," Dr Mahathir said, adding Anwar also surrounded himself with people all the time, with the hope that his supporters could create problems in the event he was arrested.

"Obviously, he is hoping that in the event he is charged, all his followers are going to gather around the courts and create problems. In other words, he has no respect for the courts at all.

The Prime Minister also expressed regret that Anwar had likened recent police actions to that of the Israeli intelligence agencies, the Shabak and the Mossad.

"If we had such a police force, the rakyat will be suffering," Dr Mahathir said, adding "they (the rakyat) are happy, continue to make money, watch sports ... enjoy themselves."

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