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Be close to the people, Umno told

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UMNO must remain close to the people, particularly the younger generation, or risk losing their support, its president and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad says.

In other countries, parties like Umno which fought for Independence have lost support because of complacency and did not ensure that their struggle was always understood by the people.

This was the message Dr Mahathir gave to Umno Supreme Council members, Youth and Wanita executive council members, and Umno division leaders at a closed-door pre-council meeting in Kuala Lumpur yesterday.

At a press conference after the meeting, the Prime Minister said while Umno still has the support of the people, a portion of the younger generation has become distanced from the party, and this is partly Umno's own fault.

"Because we want them to concentrate on their education, we did not bother them with politics. But the Opposition parties took the opportunity to meet with these students and influence them to hate Umno," Dr Mahathir said.

Umno's position has always been that these students should only be active in politics after they have successfully completed their studies, he said.

"When they are in the university, the rakyat is financing them to study and not for other activities which will jeopardise their academic performance," Dr Mahathir added.

Asked how Umno will respond to the challenge, he said Umno will explain and advise the students about their role; that they have a lot of time to pursue their political ambitions.

Dr Mahathir said Umno has not lost support as those who have been supporting Umno continue to do so.

"The people who have left Umno are those who have never been Umno members at heart. They are people from outside with a different agenda who joined Umno with the hope that they can take over Umno. Those people have left Umno.

"But we are not gaining new members from among the younger group because they have been influenced by the Opposition parties."

Asked about the perception that people join Umno just to become rich, Dr Mahathir said a lot of party members are poor. Some members do become rich, as is the case for non-Umno members, even those who oppose the party.

"Joining Umno does not ensure that you will be rich.

You become rich only if you know how to make money for yourself, not because you become an Umno member. I can show you lots of lists of thousands of people who are not Umno members who have gained from the development of this country," he said.

Responding to a foreign journalist's question on how Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim's case had affected Umno, Dr Mahathir said he believes people have generally lost interest in the former Deputy Prime Minister.

"At the recent Pas assembly, nothing was said at all about his case, his arrest, or his fate. It is a historical event which over time will be forgotten. People in this country still believe we have a good judiciary and legal system," he said.

Asked if he had indicated to those in the meeting when the general

elections will be held, Dr Mahathir said: "No, I only asked them to be prepared."

On whether the "surprise" announcement he is expected to make when addressing the Umno General Assembly this Friday will be the election date, Dr Mahathir said: "That would be a surprise. No surprise will also be a surprise."

On speculation that Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah will be appointed Kelantan Umno chief, he said anything is possible in Umno.

"Politics is the art of the possible and the impossible. You can speculate... it makes life more interesting," Dr Mahathir said.

The Umno General Assembly will be held from Friday to Sunday. It will be preceded by the Umno Youth and Wanita meetings which begin today.

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