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Dr M: Barisan Nasional will retain Permatang Pauh in polls

Azmi M. Anshar; Marina Emmanuel

PENANG, Fri. - Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad couldn't help but chuckle at the question.

"Are you campaigning already," a foreign reporter asked him at a Press conference today after he launched the PG8, a new Intel plant at the Bayan Lepas Free Industrial Zone.

Dr Mahathir said the Opposition parties had been campaigning for the past two years.

"You must give us a chance to campaign for at least one year before the election perhaps (laughs)."

On his visit yesterday to Permatang Pauh, the parliamentary constituency of sacked Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, Dr Mahathir dismissed any "political significance" although it was his first visit since the sacking.

However, he held talks with State and Permatang Pauh Umno leaders and explained the situation.

"I told them it is up to you to explain to your people," he said. "I don't want to talk about this problem in front of an audience which is really not interested in that problem."

Dr Mahathir rated the Barisan Nasional's chances in the coming general election as "very good" even when reporters raised the notion that there was still support for his former deputy.

Smiling and laughing, he maintained there was little support for Anwar.

"All who used to be with him are now in the party," he said. "They have not left, unlike in 1987 when a lot of party members and leaders left to join Tengku Razaleigh (Hamzah).

"The leaders here have not left ... maybe they have some doubts but we can clear the doubts.

Asked whether this meant Anwar was no longer an issue, Dr Mahathir said it wasn't an issue "to be raised in public".

"But among us, we still have to discuss details because as you know what is done is not something we can talk about in public, not simply because of the trial that is going on but because the subject is so filthy that we don't mention it in public."

However, he conceded there may be doubters and fanatics who would maintain their beliefs.

On feedback from State Umno leaders, especially in Permatang Pauh where the feeling on the ground was that Parti Keadilan Nasional was making inroads, he said: "Well, you saw for yourself the turnout yesterday. I think the State leaders are quite convinced that they have turned around quite a lot and they can turn around most of the rest.

"We'll see when the elections come whether I'm right or wrong."

Dr Mahathir said he did not know whether the BN could garner the same number of votes in Permatang Pauh but was certain it would win.

Questioned on the DAP's chances, Dr Mahathir said: "The DAP is worse. Many (leaders and members) have resigned, it is utterly divided because it is led by a dictator who cannot stand dissent or criticism. If someone criticises him, he will be expelled."

On overtures by the State MCA to take over the Chief Minister's post, Dr Mahathir said "everybody makes overtures".

On a report in the Chinese-language Guang Ming Daily that he would dissolve Parliament as early as tomorrow, again he laughed.

"They must know something which I don't," he said. "They can read my mind? They have an Intel chip inside and they're tracking and tapping to read my mind."

(END)