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Dr M: Deputy will succeed me (HL)

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KUALA LUMPUR, Sat. - After appointing a deputy yesterday, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today his No. 2 would, by tradition, succeed him as Prime Minister.

"Normally the deputy becomes my successor," the Prime Minister said when asked by reporters whether newly-appointed Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi would succeed him.

He, however, alluded to the fact his previous three deputies did not succeed him. "So, nowadays I am scared of saying anything. But normally, yes."

To a related question, Dr Mahathir said in assessing the qualities of his deputy, he had taken into account the need for party unity.

The announcement of Abdullah's appointment came after a three-hour monthly Umno supreme council meeting which decided to defer party election scheduled for the middle of the year.

The Prime Minister said the deferment was made as members did not want a top-level party election too close to the general election which would be held by next year.

Today, during a visit to the Immigration headquarters at Pusat Bandar Damansara, Dr Mahathir who is Umno president, said the next Umno supreme council polls would be held after the general election.

He said the general election must be called within 16 months (the last day of the current Dewan Rakyat's term), while the party polls would be within 18 months of the Umno general assembly.

"If the general assembly is in June, we can hold the party election anytime within 18 months thereafter."

He added that the supreme council was now empowered to fix dates for party elections following last month's amendments to the Umno constitution. If need be, it could postpone the party polls when there was such a situation like a general election looming.

Dr Mahathir said Umno elections at the branch level would be held in April.

Explaining his decision not to hold any other portfolios, he said this was because the duties of Prime Minister had increased with the economic downturn.

He had also previously delegated the task of visiting the States to his deputy. "As a result, I did not go to the States for some time."

He said he would go to the States to meet members of the party and the public to explain the current political situation after Hari Raya.

This would be similar to his visits last year to explain the economic crisis.

Dr Mahathir, who has vacated his Home Minister's post in favour of Abdullah, also appointed Special Functions Minister Tun Daim Zainuddin to take over the Finance Ministry from him.

For today's function, Dr Mahathir said this was his first visit to the Immigration headquarters since becoming Prime Minister in 1981, for which he apologised.

Drawing applause from the officers, he said: "Everytime I needed a passport, there was someone doing it for me."

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