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Dr M: My duty to lead BN into the next millennium

PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said yesterday that he has a duty to lead Barisan Nasional (BN) into the next millennium of the year 2000.

"Unless something happens ... I have a duty to lead the party until, of course, the general election is over," he told a press conference at the end of the first day of the 53rd Umno General Assembly in Kuala Lumpur. The Government has between now and July next year to hold the election. Dr Mahathir, who is the BN chairman and Umno president, is confident that the Government will be able to secure two-thirds majority in the general election as "we have done so in the past and we will continue to do so in the future."

He said Umno, together with the other component parties of BN, are prepared and in good spirits for the general election.

"We can hold the election at any time ... in no hurry. We are not going to indicate when we will call for the election. We will let the opposition work hard until they are exhausted and we will make our decision (on when the election will be held) when the time is right," he said.

Dr Mahathir said the opposition parties are working on different platforms and directions. "It is quite difficult for them to cooperate with each other. They do not see eye-to-eye on anything.

"I think they are fighting with each other and parties like the DAP are breaking to pieces."

On whether talks of him stepping down was the surprise he had promised during the general assembly, Dr Mahathir said, "The surprise is no surprise.

"I don't know why it (stepping down) should be a surprise. Do you expect me to step down now? There is no reason ...

"I would have stepped down last year if my good deputy had behaved himself but he thought of other things much more pleasurable and therefore, he missed the pleasure of becoming my successor."

Dr Mahathir was also asked as to why he had explained in length at the opening of the assembly on the action taken on Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim last September.

He expressed confidence that more people are beginning to believe that the Government took the right decisions on Anwar, saying that there may be some fanatics who have closed their minds to any explanation on the matter.

"Not many people are talking about it now but in politics, you don't take chances.

"We had made a decision not to disturb students, particularly the Malays, because we want them to concentrate on their studies but the opposition is spending time indoctrinating them and creating feeling of hatred towards the Government ... biting the hands that feed them," he said.

On a question from a foreign journalist on whether he will recommend a royal pardon for Anwar based on the "court of public opinion", Dr Mahathir said as the former Deputy Prime Minister claims that he is innocent, "how do we pardon an innocent person?"

Dr Mahathir said public opinion in Malaysia supports the decisions made by the judiciary.

"The public opinion in the foreign press is a different matter. They are

not our constituents. I am not going to stand for election in any other country but Malaysia.

"It is public opinion in Malaysia which counts ... As far as I can see, public opinion in Malaysia supports the Government ... a majority supports the Government.

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