

17 JAN 2000

Ghafar-President

GHAJAR FAVOURS CONTEST FOR TOP TWO POSTS

By: Mohamed Nasir Yusoff

KUALA LUMPUR, Jan 17 (Bernama) -- Umno veteran Tun Abdul Ghafar Baba said today it will be better if the posts of president and deputy president be contested in the party elections in May although the supreme council had made a stand the two top positions be unopposed.

The former deputy prime minister and deputy Umno president said the positions of the president and deputy president would be stronger if they were endorsed directly by party members.

He said there is no problem if Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and vice-president Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who is performing the duties of deputy president, continue to lead the party but it would be better if their positions were endorsed by party members.

"This does not mean I don't like Mahathir and Dollah Badawi but I love Umno more.

"No harm if they continue to lead the party but it is better if their leadership is endorsed by the members," he told reporterS at his house in Taman Duta here.

However, he is not against the supreme council's proposal that there be no contest for the two posts.

"I'm not opposing the supreme council's stand but in my view, a contest for the two posts will be better," said Ghafar, who has been just discharged from the hospital after suffering a mild stroke while in Bogor, Indonesia on Dec 27.

He is still undergoing physiotherapy at his residence.

Ghafar said Umno suffered a setback in the Nov 29 general election and as such, changes must be made to see Umno emerging stronger again.

One way is by having party elections to boost the spirit of party members, he said.

"Holding elections is a party activity. Through elections, the spirit of Umno members can be fired up. This is one way of pooling Umno's resources," he said in a clear voice albeit slowly.

A contest for the two positions apart from other posts such as the vice-presidency, Youth and Wanita chiefs and supreme council members would help restore the people's confidence on Umno, he said.

Ghafar, who has created history by winning in all the 10 general elections held in Malaysia including the latest as the MP for Batu Berendam, believed there would not be a split in Umno owing to contests for party positions as the members were a matured lot.

He said many young people were joining Umno as they wanted to see that Umno is democratic and they wanted to take part (in decision-making) and to learn how to practise democracy.

The emergence of a stronger Umno from the party elections was not only important for the Malays but also for the other races.

(Umno is the dominant party in the ruling 14-member Barisan Nasional government).

"Umno is not only important to the Malays but also to all races. We must not allow Umno to become weak or die. Umno must be there all the time," he said in a spirited tone despite looking tired.

Asked for his advice to party members intending to vie for positions, the 74-year-old Ghafar said if they had decided to contest, they should go in without talking too much.

"No need to talk so much, if you want to contest, go ahead. The more

you talk, the worse it will be," he said.

During the hour-long interview, he reiterated his previous stand that there should not be a deputy president's post.

"Many people did not agree when I suggested that there is no need for a deputy president's post. Now, it has surfaced (problems)... if the post is not in the constitution, there'll be no contest," he said.

One of the vice-presidents can replace the president when necessary, he said.

The deputy president's post is vacant following the expulsion of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim from Umno in September 1998. Anwar took over the post from Ghafar in 1993.

Asked on his health, Ghafar said he had recovered by 50 per cent from the time he suffered the stroke.

"Only my left hand is a bit weak... the others are okay. I can talk, walk, sleep and eat," he said.

Asked whether he could carry out his duties as an MP, he said he needed only another two weeks to fully recover and to resume his normal work.

"When I'm healthy, I'll mobilise the Umno veterans... the old guards should be brought to the fore," said Ghafar, who is also chairman of the Umno Veterans' Club set up in 1998 to help the government explain to the people the country's economic situation.

Asked whether he had thought of slowing down his activities, he said: "Nobody should rest in this country if you want to develop the country for the future generation... yes, I too will continue to serve the nation," he said.

He said his priorities were maintaining the country's peace, unity among the multiracial people, freedom, justice and development.

-- BERNAMA

MNY TS