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Mahathir-Retirement

MAHATHIR CONFIDENT SUCCESSOR WILL SUCCEED

MELBOURNE, July 16 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is confident whoever succeeds him will be a credible leader.

"I myself was not considered a suitable candidate for the prime ministership before I became deputy prime minister," he told Greg Sheridan, "The Australian" newspaper foreign editor recently in Kuala Lumpur.

Dr Mahathir said he had planned to retire in 1998, but the problem with his then deputy Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim put an end to those thoughts.

But he is adamant that the present parliamentary term, which must end by 2004, will be his last. "After all, I will be 80 years old," he said.

Dr Mahathir acknowledged that the black eye that Anwar received in custody, which resulted in the former Inspector-General of Police's conviction, was politically beneficial for the opposition parties.

But Dr Mahathir said the Anwar issue was fading from public consciousness.

Keadilan deputy chairman Chandra Muzaffar said the "larger picture" of Dr Mahathir's achievements and failures was complex.

"The post-election scene shows an erosion of his support in the Malay belt. He took a number of measures which suggested the panic button, such as restrictions on opposition newspapers," Muzaffar told Sheridan.

"But the man is intelligent enough to recognise the problems and dangled the carrot before the electorate -- such as setting up a human rights commission with some credible people.

"He has made some adjustments and, with the economic recovery, I'd say he's in a fairly comfortable position. But he hasn't yet got what he wants, which is clear evidence he's reconsolidated his position with the Malay electorate overall."

Muzaffar said there had been "a saving grace" for Dr Mahathir. "He's not like Suharto, with the family -- he's always had a real desire to develop the country."

-- BERNAMA

NDC RM