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Najib-Umno

SMOOTH LEADERSHIP TRANSITION IN UMNO, SAYS NAJIB

By: Tham Choy Lin

SINGAPORE, Nov 11 (Bernama) -- Malaysia's Umno party is likely to see a smooth leadership transition under Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, said its vice-president Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak.

In an interview with Singapore's Straits Times newspaper, Najib said the party had recovered some support among Malays which it lost during the last general election to Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS) and Parti Keadilan Nasional (Keadilan).

Najib said he did not believe that people should be forced out of power but that political change should be planned and managed.

"I believe Dr Mahathir will maintain a smooth transition. He is a responsible politician with the interests of the country at heart," said Najib.

Asked if he accepted the idea of Umno deputy president Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi becoming the next Umno president, Najib said:

"Seriously, I work very well with Pak Lah (Abdullah). And if we continue to work well and to trust each other, I don't see any problems.

"I believe a lot in the party's elective leadership, that we should try to support each other for the sake of the party. The important thing is not so much who leads but that the party will emerge as a force."

He said it was unfortunate that Dr Mahathir, now serving his fifth term as prime minister, had had to shoulder the brunt of attacks from opposition parties.

"The opposition has been quite clever in lumping everything on him. But he is one statesman who dares to speak up and because of that he gets a lot of flak, especially in the Western media.

"It does not mean that, without Dr Mahathir, things will be easier. It might be a lot worse, as in the case of Indonesia. We should not fall into this trap which has been clearly laid out by the opposition," he said.

Najib said Umno had gone through much soul-searching since losing ground in the last general election and "there had been some, but not overwhelming" improvement in its standing among the Malays since then.

Asked if he would become the prime minister, Najib said he hated to answer the question which had been a major burden from the day he joined politics.

"But I'm philosophical... everybody is ambitious in politics. I've always tended to be on the cautious side and never over-extended myself. Whatever is going to happen, let it take its natural course," said Najib, 47, the eldest son of the country's second prime minister and now into his 24th year in politics.

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