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`Vital to be leading BN party'

eed; Hizreen Kamal

UMNO must remain in power and continue as the leading party in the Barisan Nasional to ensure that Vision 2020 is achieved, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said yesterday.

The party president said as there were specific plans and targets to be met, the country needed a party that was able to understand and carry out the policy successfully.

"That's my job now... to try and get the party to understand its role in achieving Vision 2020," he told a post-general assembly Press conference.

The Prime Minister said his ultimate goal was to put the country on track to achieve Vision 2020.

On the party's new line-up and whether he was confident that it would be able to help him realise the objectives, Dr Mahathir expressed confidence in their capabilities.

"They have to cope with differences in views and opinions," he said, "and channel the diverse opinions accordingly".

Dr Mahathir said another focus was for members to close ranks and rally the support of people outside the party.

"I think they (will) realise there is no benefit in fighting each other," he said. "The majority will cool down and return to the original struggle of Umno."

On how he viewed the proceedings at the assembly, Dr Mahathir said he noticed that members were more critical of the party and wanted reform.

"Sometimes it looked as if they had rejected the party's struggles," he said, "but after we explained, they became more committed to the party and its struggles".

On ways to capture the support of rural people, Dr Mahathir said the most important thing was to talk to them.

"This is necessary as some of them were beneficiaries of the Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim regime and had benefited from his patronage," he said. "He used to give them shares, money and promised them things if he became the Prime Minister. These people are still around and they are campaigning for him.

"We will counter them by explaining the truth to the people as opposition arises from wrong perception. For example, they have promoted an image that I am a very oppressive pharaoh, calling me firaun and Mahazalim.

"By doing this, they hope the people will hate me... they have nothing else but to resort to labelling and character-assassination."

Dr Mahathir was also asked to respond on his retirement plans and his successor.

Stressing that he would not be around forever, the Prime Minister said he was not immortal and could get sick or drop dead one day.

But before retiring, he said, he had to make sure that the party accepted and fully respected the new leadership.

"That is my job and I can't just let go of everything because I have retired."

On whether he would be around at the next party general assembly, Dr Mahathir turned the table and asked the reporter: "Are you married? How many children will you have? It is so far in the future, you can't tell these things."

On his health and whether it would be the prime consideration for him to

step down, he said: "My health is, unfortunately, very good at the moment. I feel better, I can do more work than the average... 16 to 18 hours a day.

"But obviously I have to step down as you will never know what's going to happen. Of course, you like to speculate and the stock market will go down."

On attempts to undermine his deputy Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, Dr Mahathir said such things happened and he knew of those who were very keen to turn the views of Umno against Abdullah and himself.

"They may think when somebody else becomes the PM, they will get jobs, shares, perks and all kinds of things for themselves," Dr Mahathir said.

"This happened during the tenure of the former Finance Minister where all his cronies were awarded huge number of shares and highly-paid jobs."

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