

PM happy with debates

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'Focus is on unity and strengthening the party, unlike previous years'

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said he is happy with the quality of the debates presented on the first day of the assembly.

"I see that the focus is on strengthening Umno this year ... I think it's a bit different from previous years when many raised issues which were not very constructive," he told a press conference at the end of the first day of the assembly.

"This time, they are more spirited and look more intent on talking about unity in the party and strengthening Umno."

Asked about cases of Felda administrators allegedly favouring opposition supporters when allocating government funds, an issue brought up by a Perak delegate, Mahathir said: "The government, when disbursing funds, has never discriminated against anyone."

"But if the officers' intention is to reject Umno supporters and give the funds to opposition supporters, then they have acted improperly. We will investigate whether this is true."

Mahathir also echoed the concerns expressed by his deputy, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, on Wednesday that if Umno does not shape up, it will lose in the next general election - a topic the prime minister stressed in his speech yesterday morning.

"I even gave the figures. We have 72 seats now and they have 31, and we only need to lose 21

seats and we'll be in trouble," he said.

"That's what I'm doing, I'm telling them that unless they close ranks and behave themselves, we may lose."

He also said the perception among Malays that they will be safe regardless of who forms the government is a fallacy.

"If the Malays split, they will become weak and will lose their

influence and power in the government. If that happens, the government will not help them."

Asked whether Tun Daim Zainuddin's departure would affect Umno-linked companies

such as UEM and Renong, Mahathir said: "I don't see that they are linked to Umno. But Umno has the right to buy shares like anybody else."

Asked how long the New Economic Policy would be in place, he said: "I don't think it's going to be permanent, but I think it's a safety net sort of thing. Once there is no necessity for a safety net, then, of course, there's no need for that policy."

"I explained that it is for the bumiputras to achieve on their own the targets set and even go beyond them."

"And if they do that, then there will be no necessity for any discrimination in favour of them."

Asked when he will step down, considering that he has held the position for about 20 years, Mahathir said: "This is a very difficult question to answer."

"If I had my way, I would have stepped down in 1998, but the circumstances did not permit me to do that and now I am caught here."

"But some people would like me to disappear or disintegrate. Other people, somehow or other, still insist that I be around."

"If you listened to the debate today, there seemed to be quite some support for me. So, I will have to find a right time."

Asked whether he would contest in the next general election, he said: "I don't know. I may be sick, I may fall down, I may be rejected by my party. I really don't know."