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## Umno members accept meritocracy proposal

KUALA LUMPUR, Wed. - Umno members today overwhelmingly accepted party president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's proposal for the gradual introduction of meritocracy in the university intake of Malay students.

Umno deputy president and Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said those present at the briefing today acknowledged the necessity of the move which would gradually increase the standard and performance of Malay students.

"Members understand Dr Mahathir's explanation on the dire situation of the Malay students and their backwardness. They have agreed to work in a concerted effort to overcome this," Abdullah told reporters after the briefing.

He said those present agreed that the standard of Malay students at the varsity level should be enhanced by gradually raising the standards for acceptance into the faculties.

"Whatever the criteria is (for Malays), we have agreed to raise the standards so that those who pursue studies at universities are students with quality," he said.

On the initial objection from Umno Youth to the proposal, Abdullah said the movement's outcry was without facts.

"It's not a compromise ... he (Umno Youth chief Datuk Hishammuddin Tun Hussein) was never at the supreme council meeting (which deliberated upon the move), so he didn't know what happened," Abdullah clarified.

Meanwhile, Hishammuddin gave the assurance that his movement would support the party president's stand for a system based on merit to be imposed on Bumiputera students entering public universities.

He said Dr Mahathir wanted to "shock" the Malays into realising that they would not be able to compete with other races if they did not improve their academic standards.

Hishammuddin said the undertaking required the efforts of all Malays especially parents and teachers.

Asked what would be done if Bumiputera students still failed to achieve the minimum academic standards required under the system, Hishammuddin said safety nets in the form of technical and vocational training programmes would be made available.

Umno supreme council member and Kelantan deputy liaison chief Datuk Annuar Musa said the briefing served to clarify confusion among members.

"I admit that even I was unclear about the proposed meritocracy system," he said.

Annuar said the gist of the Prime Minister's message was how to enhance the academic performance of Malay students and to dispel their beliefs that they could take their educational privileges for granted.

"The priority now is for the party to mobilise the masses into realising what needs to be done," he added.

Supreme council member Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar said the briefing was to explain to the party members the aims of the system.

"The explanation now has to be passed on to the grassroots so that members understand the objectives," he said.

As such, Syed Hamid said all party divisional chiefs and supreme council members must go down to the grassroots and explain the issue to them.

Supreme Council member Datuk Shahrir Samad meanwhile said that Umno should embark on a detailed programme to enlighten the Malays,

particularly the students, on the agenda of the proposal.

"We cannot drop a bombshell and then keep quiet about it. Umno must explain that the move is not to restrict the Malays from entering universities but is an attempt to gradually increase their standard and performance," he said.

Shahrir said Umno had to play an "interventionist" role in the issue rather than just depend on the Government, schools or parents.

"Dr Mahathir basically called on Umno leaders and members to play an active role and intervene at the grassroots level," said the vocal Umno stalwart from Johor.

Asked on the possible backlash from the community over the move, Shahrir said it depended on how the issue was explained to the masses.

"If the decision was properly explained as a move to enhance the performance of the Malay students rather than to restrict their entry, then it would be accepted positively.

"If the quota is reduced there may be a backlash but that is not the case," he said, adding that he was confident the Malay students could accept the challenge if they were led in a proper manner.

Selangor Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Dr Mohamad Khir Toyo said the Malays needed to be jolted from their complacency, and raising the required entry qualifications into universities was an excellent way to do so.

He said the Malays still did not realise the importance of excelling in education.

"Since the country achieved independence until now, this attitude among the Malays has not changed much.

"That is why the Prime Minister shed tears during his address just now ... he is sad and tired.

"He (Dr Mahathir) has been in politics for over 30 years and he has seen that nothing much has changed in terms of the Malays' attitude towards education and knowledge.

"He has turned the country and economy around, but not the mindset of the Malays towards education."

Dr Mohamad Khir said in fact, other forms of negative behaviour had emerged among the Malays.

"If this is allowed to continue, the Malays will one day be beggars in their own country."

Dr Mohamad Khir said Dr Mahathir was a role model as he had also excelled academically.

"I hope other Umno leaders who can act as role models will come forward and lead our youths to the path of excellence."

Malaysian Youth Council president Saifuddin Abdullah said the council supported the move to cultivate excellence in education among Malay students.

"Increasing the entry qualifications for Malay students in stages is a good move. It will serve to shock Malay students into action.

"We are glad that the quota system remains. This is because there is still too much of an imbalance between Malay and non-Malay students."

He said youth movements should also play their role and help Malay students excel in their studies.

"In the past, tuition classes were organised for rural students. This needs to be re-activated," he added.

Federation of Peninsular Malay Students president Datuk Suhaimi Ibrahim said its members would go down to the ground and pass the Prime Minister's message to teachers, lecturers and students.

He said a Malay Students' Convention would be held at Universiti Tenaga Nasional from Aug 13 to 15.

"Volunteers will be talking to teachers and students.

"Besides excellence in education, we will also be speaking to students about the social problems afflicting youths," he said, adding that the proposal announced by Dr Mahathir today would help stop Malay students from being complacent.

(END)