

30 JULY 2001

Mahathir-Sarawak

UMNO NOT BACKING NON-BN CANDIDATES IN SARAWAK, SAYS MAHATHIR

KOTA KINABALU, July 30 (Bernama) -- The Prime Minister and Umno President Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today Umno is not backing any independent candidates in the coming Sarawak state election.

"No, Umno does not stab its partners in the back," he told reporters here after officiating at the 7th Congress of the United Pasokmomogun Kadazandusun Murut Organisation (UPKO).

"Even if we have any sympathy for any group we will always stand up for the Barisan Nasional (BN)," said Dr Mahathir who is also BN chairman.

Dr Mahathir was asked to comment on talk that several independent candidates intending to contest in the upcoming Sarawak state election -- which must be held by November -- have Umno's backing.

Illustrating his point, the prime minister said that during the recent by-election in Sabah for the Likas state seat, Umno came out strongly to support the BN candidate Datuk Yong Teck Lee.

"Umno in Likas gave their full support to the BN, we came out strongly to support the candidate even though the candidate is not from Umno.

"This is because Umno is committed to BN. The person who win is not that important...it is the BN who should win," he said.

The peninsula-based Umno had spread its wings to Sabah but not to Sarawak.

In the Likas by-election on July 21, Yong defeated three other candidates by a majority of 7,541 votes.

Asked on the BN's achievement in Likas, Dr Mahathir said he was very happy with the result, especially when the BN retained Likas with an increased majority.

"It goes to prove that it is not phantom voters that give us the victory...there may be phantom voters (before) but if there are, I have raised this point that if you think they are phantom voters, you should make the protest from the beginning and not when you lose the election.

"Here when they lose the election, they protest. If they win, they keep quiet because if they complain then there would have to be a by-election," Dr Mahathir said.

On the strong showing by the BN in Kadazandusun areas in Likas, he said it was because the Kadazandusun had changed their attitude.

In the past, he said, they were suspicious of the BN and "rightly so because they thought that the government of Sabah was dominated by Malays and Muslims."

"But we have given consideration to them and they are now much more relaxed and willing to accept the concept of working together," he said.

Asked on the opposition claim that the small turnout of 52.95 per cent in the Likas by-election was because voters had lost confidence in the electoral roll, Dr Mahathir said, low turnout was always a feature in a by-election.

"That is the attitude in a by-election and some people thought that we are going to win anyway while others could not be bothered because they are only interested in an election when the result will determine who will form the government," he added.

-- BERNAMA

JS HAK RYN