

22 FEB 2001
Mahathir-PAS

UMNO STILL WILLING TO DISCUSS MALAY UNITY BUT REJECTS PAS' NEW TERMS

KUALA LUMPUR, Feb 22 (Bernama) -- Umno is still willing to meet PAS to discuss Malay unity but cannot fulfil the new conditions set by the opposition party as they are outside Umno's jurisdiction, Prime Minister and Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

He said Umno was prepared to discuss any subject with PAS as long as PAS did not impose pre-conditions such the return of oil royalty to Terengganu and allowing Harakah (PAS' official organ) to be published eight times a month.

It was not within Umno's power to meet these PAS demands, " although Umno can refer them to the government," Dr Mahathir said at a press conference after chairing an Umno Supreme Council meeting at the party headquarters here today.

Last Sunday, PAS president Datuk Fadzil Noor announced the party's decision to postpone the proposed meeting with Umno slated for the next day, insisting that the meeting should also deal with oil royalty payment to Terengganu, frequency of Harakah's publication and Umno's proposal to ban use of the term Islam for names of political parties.

Fadzil had said that the postponement was due to lack of feedback from Umno on the conducive atmosphere required for such meeting and because of technical loose-ends.

At today's news conference, Dr Mahathir said Umno still maintained that the proposed meeting with PAS would be crucial and would do good.

It was for this reason that Umno accepted PAS' original conditions that the meeting discuss the issue relating to jailed former deputy prime minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim and alleged government malpractices.

In fact Umno did not limit the proposed meeting to discuss only Malay unity, Dr Mahathir said.

"But these pre-conditions themselves have already decided the issues to be discussed even before the meeting gets started. If we've already arrived at a decision on a particular issue, why the need for discussion..if one side already has its demands met, what's the use of discussing," he said.

Dr Mahathir said the Supreme Council, which discussed the matter at length, preferred that both sides meet first.

"We are still willing to meet and we should set aside conditions and instead meet first even if there is no topic to talk about..it is okay if there is no topic, we just meet," the prime minister said.

Dr Mahathir said it was necessary to hold the meeting as he was convinced that it would bring about some good.

Asked what would be Umno's stand if PAS remained adamant that its demands be met first, Dr Mahathir said:"We pray that they (PAS) will have a change of heart and meet us."

Dr Mahathir said although the proposed meeting would only involve the Malays, it should not be a cause for concern for the non-Malays because Malay unity has been part of national unity.

Component parties of the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition would not be ignored as Umno would continue working with the Chinese, Indians and other organisations, he said.

"The aim of our meeting is not to team up to fight against the non-Malays. In fact even the Chinese would want to see the Malays narrow down their differences so that politically the country is calm," he said.

Dr Mahathir said Umno secretary-general Tan Sri Khalil Yaakob, who

heads the Umno technical committee for the proposed meeting, will communicate with his PAS counterpart Nasharudin Mat Isa to continue with efforts to make it a reality.

Asked on the notion that it was Umno that desperately wanted to have the meeting, Dr Mahathir said he would not comment on it more than necessary as he wanted to create an atmosphere conducive for such a meeting.

Asked on Fadzil's argument that PAS can lay down terms as Umno made the proposition and asked for "its hand", Dr Mahathir said this was not about a marriage proposal.

On the contrary, Umno was only responding to a Universiti Utara Malaysia lecturer's proposal that both parties sit down and iron out their differences, he said.

Moreover, the proposed meeting was not about showing party strength as the last general election in 1999 showed that Umno still has mass support as it won 72 parliamentary seats against 27 secured by PAS, Dr Mahathir added.

-- BERNAMA

AR RV ES RYN