

Govt to set up council of ulamas, says Abdullah

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KUALA LUMPUR: The Government will set up a council of ulamas or religious scholars to advise it on issues concerning the development of Muslims in the country, said Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

He said that while the Government had always listened to the views of ulamas, it was felt that the most effective and best way to recognise their contribution was to institutionalise the practice.

"Umno leaders, since the days of our struggle for independence, have always been close to the ulamas and appreciate their views concerning the development of Muslims in the country.

"This is a practice which continues till this day. But sadly, not many people knew about this and thought we ignored the ulamas," he said after attending a Hari Raya Aidiladha function at the Sultan Sulaiman Club in Kampung Baru yesterday.

Abdullah, who is also Home Minister, said all ulamas would be welcome as their number in the council would not be limited.

"It will be open to ulamas but let them be capable and highly knowledgeable with expertise in certain fields and with specialisation in the Quran and Hadith," he added.

Asked if ulamas from PAS would also be welcomed, Abdullah said the Government wanted ulamas who could con-

tribute to the development of Muslims without being blinkered by political dogmas.

"We do not want them to be weighed in by political considerations and biased, which will prevent them from giving sound advice," he added.

Abdullah said the council was thought of after accusations by the sections of the opposition that the Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad was "anti-ulamas."

The accusations were levelled against Dr Mahathir following his speech in New York recently that some self-appointed ulamas were incompetent in development and administration.

Asked when the advisory council would be established, Abdullah said he had to discuss the details with Dr Mahathir.

Abdullah said the setting up of the council would not jeopardise the function of the National Fatwa Council.

"It will not compete with or relegate the functions of the council.

"They have their own role to play and we will still consult them when the need arises," he said.

Commenting on five KMM members who were sent to the Kamunting detention camp for two years under the Internal Security Act, Abdullah said they were detained for involvement in activities that could destabilise the country.

"They are not being held for some frivolous reasons," he added.