

Why did he do it?

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Nation still stunned by Dr M's sudden quit announcement

KUALA LUMPUR: Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad left for Europe yesterday for a week-long vacation after shocking the nation with his resignation announcement. He was accompanied by his wife Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohamed Ali.

Although Deputy Prime Minister and Umno deputy president Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi told party delegates at their annual caucus within the hour that their party president had retracted his resignation, the nation is still stunned.

Many are still grappling to

understand what drove Mahathir, who completes his 21st year as prime minister this Friday, to suddenly announce on Saturday that he was resigning from all his posts in Umno and the Barisan Nasional (BN).

He made the announcement while rounding up the three days of debates at the closing of his party's 56th general assembly at the Putra World Trade Centre.

The question being asked is, had his voice not failed him or he had not been overcome by emotion, would he have announced his resignation from the government as well?

Political observers say that even had he not announced it then, it would have to follow a short while later, as by convention a prime minister has to be president of Umno and chairman of Barisan Nasional.

Only by being chairman of BN can he claim to enjoy the confidence of the majority of elected representatives in the Dewan Rakyat and therefore the prime ministership.

However, he could continue to be prime minister without being chairman of BN if all the coalition's MPs pledged that they enjoy their confidence, as they did

after Umno was declared illegal by the High Court in 1988.

Before he was overcome by emotion, Mahathir had said: "I would like to announce that I am resigning as Umno president and all my posts in the party and as Barisan Nasional chairman and all other posts in Barisan Nasional..."

So far the nation has not heard him say that he had withdrawn those words. Umno deputy president and Mahathir's appointed successor Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi had

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announced within the hour that the prime minister had agreed to retract his resignation.

Abdullah chaired an emergency meeting of the party supreme council on Saturday and following this, announced that Mahathir would take 10 days' leave and be back on July 3 to prepare for a scheduled three-day visit to Thailand beginning July 5.

What puzzled many is that even Mahathir's family was reportedly unaware of his intention to announce his resignation and analysts were divided over the meaning of the 76-year-old leader's action.

"You must understand he has been under terrible strain," Universiti Malaya professor Khoo Kay Kim said.

"He must be emotionally fragile now," political science professor P. Rama-

samy of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia said. "Maybe he was emotionally disturbed. I don't think he really planned it in a rational manner."

A few disagree, saying that Mahathir is not frail and that he knew what he was doing. They said despite his age he has a strong character and if he was emotional it means that he cared.

In his opening address at the Umno assembly on Thursday, Mahathir said he had failed for 21 years in his main task of changing the mindset of the country's Malay majority, whom he said were lazy.

But one observation was that the teary and emotional reaction to his shock resignation had shown that Mahathir himself had become "the crutch of the nation" which found the prospect of life without his leadership "unimaginable".