

Succession spotlight falls on other leaders

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WHEN Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi chaired the Barisan Nasional supreme council meeting last week, there was light-hearted ribbing among the component party heads as to who would be joining Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad into retirement.

One lanky Barisan leader, known for his humour, told his listeners in jest that he, too, had had enough while another leader said his members had given him open signals that he should retire, even before Dr Mahathir's announcement.

Another leader pointed out that PAS has had a changing of the guard following the death of party president Datuk Fadzil Noor recently.

On Friday, PAS spiritual adviser Datuk Nik Aziz Nik Mat said he planned to call it a day and that his tenure as Kelantan Menteri Besar could be his last.

On the same day, MCA deputy president Datuk Lim Ah Lek, 60, asked his party boss, Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik, 59, to announce his retirement date and name his successor.

The four vice-presidents - Datuk Dr Fong Chan Onn, 56, Datuk Chua Jui Meng, 59, Datuk Seri Ong Ka Ting, 46, and Datuk Chan Kong Choy, 47 are in line to go up the ladder.

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Even the opposition politicians are not spared such scrutiny, which is only natural as politics is about power and position.

The reality is that when internal squabbles flare up, they have little to do with party policies or even directions. Party leaders merely group themselves into factions as a means to pursue their political ambitions. There is no shortage of leaders waiting to take over a party vacancy.

Over the past one week, the names of various Barisan leaders, said to be retiring soon, have cropped up and their supposed successors named.

Negotiations, with time-frame ranging from a few months to one year, are said to be under way to name the successors and that the senior leaders would join Dr Mahathir.

These senior politicians are said to be planning to leave the scene before the next general election to pave the way for their successors to get a mandate.

But as in all speculations and rumour-mon-



gering, there is probably only an ounce of truth.

Gerakan president Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik, 63, who has headed the party for 22 years, went on record last week to say he had no plans of retiring. The same can probably be said about Dr Ling, MIC president Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu, 66, and DAP strongman Lim Kit Siang, 61.

Supporters of Dr Ling, upset by Ah Lek's statements, came to his defence yesterday, saying their boss is only 59 years old.

Dr Mahathir, they said, was 56 years old when he was made Prime Minister.

Still, Dr Mahathir must be commended for his readiness to leave the stage when he is at his strongest. Not many leaders are prepared to give up the power, glamour and prestige of their posts.

By naming his successor early, Dr Mahathir will help Pak Lah, 62, to further consolidate his position in the party and head off any challenges.

Already, there is talk that the Umno elec-

TAKING THE LEAD...

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tions, scheduled for next year, would be postponed until after the general election in 2003 or 2004.

Although Dr Mahathir has named Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi as his successor, his task is still not completed. One and a half years is a long time in politics - we can expect Dr Mahathir to be involved in some crucial decisions affecting the party.

There will be the nagging questions about who will be Pak Lah's choice as deputy.

He has three vice-presidents - Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin and Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib - to choose from.

Abdullah, when he becomes PM, need not have to follow the hierarchy. He has the prerogative to decide whom he wants as his deputy.

In fact, Dr Mahathir was handpicked by the late Tun Hussein Onn to succeed him as Prime Minister in 1981 although there were others more senior than him in the party.

By convention, the vice-president with the highest votes stands a good chance of becoming DPM.

The leadership succession may have started in some Barisan parties quietly but we should not expect these party chiefs to announce changes now.

As in any transition, the succession plan can only be realised if the players involved work it out away from any pressure and publicity.

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