

Dr M returns, breaks silence

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Mahathir comes home to hero's welcome and may offer clues on his next move

KUALA LUMPUR: Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad returns from a 10-day Italian vacation today to a hero's welcome and to break silence over his shock resignation and perhaps offer clues on the potency of his remaining term.

His arrival to a rousing welcome by an expected crowd of 40,000 at Subang RMAF base at 7.30am and the subsequent press conference will be telecast live by RTM.

Mahathir, who left the country a day after dropping the bombshell on June 22 that he was quitting after 21 years, is not expected to spring any surprise but "people want to hear it from the horse's mouth", according to an analyst.

The 76-year-old leader and Asia's longest serving statesman has not spoken publicly since. But his party Umno said last week he would stay in office until October next year to ensure a smooth transition of power. Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi has been named as successor to Mahathir.

Mahathir is due to take two months' leave at some stage before he finally steps down to give Abdullah, who will be acting prime minister, a feel of running the country by himself.

The stock market has steadied after falling amid the early confusion over the

prime minister's plans, and Abdullah said this week that the market response had been "very encouraging".

But the big question mark is whether Mahathir known for his outspokenness and forceful personality -- will decide to take a back seat and leave the running of the government to Abdullah before he bids farewell. Analysts, economists and plain Mahathirites say that probably will not happen.

Mahathir has personally championed causes including meritocracy, the teaching of mathematics and science in English, and recently allowing 10% of places in Mara junior science colleges to non-Malays.

The prime minister is credited with steering the country out of the 1997/98 Asian currency crisis, controversially pegging its currency to the US dollar and sheltering the country's financial system with capital controls.

Malaysia's multi-ethnic population of around 23 million has enjoyed relative peace and prosperity under his rule.

In a sign that "Dr M" as he is popularly known is still in charge, one of his first tasks after his arrival today will be to chair the weekly cabinet meeting.

And on Friday, Mahathir leaves for a two-day official visit to Thailand.