

PM: I'M FINE WITH NAJIB

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and IAN MCINTYRE

JITRA: Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said yesterday he has no objection if Umno vice-president Datuk Seri Najib Razak is made Deputy Prime Minister.

However, he said it would be up to Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi to choose his deputy when he becomes the Prime Minister.

He said he was only "reflecting a possibility" that Najib might be

named Deputy Prime Minister when he stepped down.

At a meeting with the Kubang Pasu Umno division committee on Wednesday, Dr Mahathir was quoted as saying: "Actually if I am no longer the Prime Minister, Pak Lah (Abdullah) will be the Prime Minister today and perhaps Najib will be the Deputy Prime Minister but they are willing to wait for another 16 months to assume the posts."

Dr Mahathir said yesterday that in the Umno system, the party president's successor would take

over as the acting president when the president stepped down.

"In the Government, the person who is the leader of the biggest party, namely the Barisan Nasional, will be the Prime Minister when the Prime Minister steps down.

"So when I step down, Pak Lah will be the Prime Minister. It is up to Pak Lah to form the Government and choose his Cabinet," he told reporters after signing plaques to mark the foundation stone-laying ceremony for the Kubang Pasu district government administrative

complex at Batu 14, Jalan Changloon near here.

In Umno, Dr Mahathir said, the deputy president would be determined by the party but added that whoever was chosen by Abdullah as Deputy Prime Minister would usually be the acting deputy president.

"That was what happened to me and I am confident this practice is something good," he said.

Asked if he was endorsing Najib as Deputy Prime Minister when he

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made the statement on Wednesday, Dr Mahathir replied: "Let's say I have no objection."

Asked how he thought the other Umno vice-presidents would react to the "open endorsement for Najib," he said: "I don't know. Whoever is chosen, whether Najib or anybody, they have given an undertaking that there will be no struggle."

He said they would not go around trying to put down each other.

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Asked whether he was going to appoint a second Finance Minister, Dr Mahathir said he was thinking about it, adding in jest that he would consider any applicant even from among the press.

In Putrajaya, Abdullah said there was no need to blow up the issue of who will be the next Deputy Prime Minister after the change in the country's leadership in October next year, reports *Bernama*.

"This issue need not be blown up now because we

have to continue working together and it will be another 16 months before I take over as the party and government leader," he told reporters after receiving a courtesy call from South Korean Construction and Transport Minister Lim In-taik at his office.

He said that for now, Umno and its leaders must concentrate on enhancing co-operation among themselves.

"A decision on the matter cannot be avoided but the right honourable prime minister is still here, the party leaders are still here and I have my

tasks and the (Umno) vice-presidents have theirs.

"A decision will be made but the co-operation must continue ... we must remain as friends," he said.

Abdullah said the party's wishes must take priority over that of the individual because it would make Umno better and stronger.

"If we prioritise the wishes of the party, the consensus among us will improve but if this objective is undermined by personal agenda, then the co-operation will be affected.

"We understand that if our

party does not succeed in the elections, we will lose the opportunity to continue to serve the race, country and people. What gives Umno its success is political power and if that power is lost because of disputes, then no one wins," he said.

Abdullah said the three Umno vice-presidents (Najib, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin and Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib) had made good contributions to the leadership and there were no disputes among them.

In Pekan, Najib said he

would not make any more comments on the matter, reports **ROSLINA MOHAMAD**.

"I better not comment on it. No more statements," said Najib when met after the opening of Pahang Perkim's 30th annual general meeting yesterday.

On whether he had any advice for party members on the issue, Najib said he preferred to let the two top leaders do it.

"Let Pak Lah and the Prime Minister advise the members. I shall remain silent," he added.