

PM's remark makes Najib the front-runner

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IT may be too early for speculation on who will be the next Deputy Prime Minister. After all, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is still Prime Minister and Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi is his deputy.

But last week, Dr Mahathir dropped a strong hint. Some said it was an endorsement while others said he had been quoted out of context.

Dr Mahathir decided to clarify matters on Friday when he said it was up to Abdullah, his anointed successor, to choose his deputy and form his own Cabinet when he became prime minister next year.

Asked whether he endorsed Najib as deputy prime minister, Dr Mahathir said: "Let's say I have no objections."

And when asked whether he would tell this to the other Umno members, Dr Mahathir replied: "I'm telling you now."

For safe measure perhaps, he added: "I don't know who will be chosen as deputy, either Najib or anybody else."

But the statement by Dr Mahathir is certainly a boost for the Defence Minister. The Prime Minister's statement will certainly help to avert any possible power play during the 16-month transitional period.

Najib, who tops the hierarchy of the three Umno vice-presidents, played down Dr Mahathir's statement by saying he was surprised and that he would leave it to the leadership to decide.

Interestingly, Wanita Umno chief Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz was quoted on Thursday as saying that party leaders should work on governing the country instead of speculating who will be appointed DPM when Abdullah is in charge.

Commenting on Dr Mahathir's earlier statement on Wednesday that "perhaps Najib would be Deputy Prime Minister" when he was no longer PM, Rafidah insisted that Dr Mahathir did not say it in the context of naming who would be the next DPM.

"If you analyse it like that, then that is speculation. Even Najib is not comfortable with the speculation. In the end, speculation will only destroy the party," she reportedly said.

But Dr Mahathir's remarks, rightly or wrongly, have put Najib ahead of the pack as the leadership decides on the second-in-command when Pak Lah takes over the helm.

The other contenders are Domestic, Trade and Consumer Affairs Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin and former Selangor



Mentri Besar Tan Sri Muhammad Taib.

For most analysts, the early endorsement would appear to help Abdullah establish control over Umno and help reduce internal manoeuvring.

Umno is scheduled to hold party elections next year but there is speculation that this may be postponed to make way for a general election, although not due until late 2004.

Najib, 48, is the son of the late Tun Abdul Razak, the country's second prime minister and nephew of Tun Hussein Onn, the third premier.

He was only 23 when he won uncontested his father's parliamentary seat in Pahang. An economics degree holder, he has served as minister under the Mahathir administration for 14 years.

Through the statement, Dr Mahathir seems to have voiced his preference for Abdullah's deputy. Although Abdullah can make his own choice, it is likely that he will respect Dr Mahathir's wishes.

As in any party, the president has the strongest say in his choice of successor. Once the person assumes the chair, the support will come automatically.

The early statement will in many ways help end speculation on the future DPM. The line of succession has been drawn clearly and will obviously pave the way for a smooth transition.

But as Abdullah said, there is no need to speculate over such posts. Umno leaders should focus their attention on supporting the Prime Minister and his deputy in carrying out their work for the country.

More importantly, Umno's top leaders have given an undertaking that they would not go around and try to pull each other down.

The display of discipline by these leaders speaks well for Umno, which is seen as the backbone of Barisan Nasional. The component parties within Barisan should take a leaf from how Umno is carrying out its succession.

□ Wong Chun Wai can be reached at onthethebeat@thestar.com.my