

07/07/2002

Abdullah will lead just as well, says Dr Mahathir

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LESS than a week after confirming Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi as his successor, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad gave a vote of confidence to his deputy in front of an international audience.

"I'm sure my deputy can lead the nation with the same capacity as me," Dr Mahathir said when asked whether Abdullah could be as efficient as he was.

The question was posed by a member of the audience at a luncheon talk he gave just before launching the Malaysia-Thai Chamber of Commerce yesterday.

Dr Mahathir arrived in the Thai capital after spending a night in Chiangmai, about an hour's plane ride from Bangkok. He leaves for Langkawi today.

Elaborating, Dr Mahathir said: "You must understand that it's not so much the individual. Actually, it's the system that we have put in place. It's the policies, too.

"That's why I think Abdullah will be able to lead with the same capacity as me."

Returning to Kuala Lumpur from an overseas holiday on Wednesday, Dr Mahathir reiterated that he was relinquishing all but one political and Government posts in October next year, and named Abdullah as his successor.

Dr Mahathir will remain as MP for Kubang Pasu.

At the luncheon talk yesterday, the Prime Minister took many questions from the floor, mostly from members of Thai academia and businessmen. Some of the questions were asked and answered in other forums previously, but the Thai audience was eager to hear it from the "horse's mouth", so to speak.

A Malaysian working in Bangkok with an American multinational wanted to know the secret of the Prime Minister's amazing energy even at his advanced age. The questioner said he had thought of retiring at the age of 60, but wondered whether this was too young an age to stop work.

Dr Mahathir, quite used to the question, said: "Well, at one time I also felt 60 would be a good age to retire. But for a person in my position, I think I can determine when I should retire.

"I enjoy my work and get a lot of satisfaction when I see results. It's very stimulating to see results _ it's almost like Viagra.

"Therefore, I think that as long as you can still work, you should continue to do so. There are people who think I should work until I die ... I think one should retire when one is still healthy so that one can still enjoy life."

The Prime Minister was also praised for his work, but a questioner wanted to know what his shortcomings were in the national context, and how other Asean leaders could avoid them.

Against his success, Dr Mahathir was also asked why his Government should control the Malaysian media. Refuting the questioner's perception that he controls the media, Dr Mahathir said:

"We don't control the media, but like everywhere else, some media choose to support the Government. There are media houses which go against the Government but they are mostly vernacular and therefore escape the attention of the English-reading public and foreigners.

"As for my shortcomings, one of them is my inability to keep my mouth

shut, and I'm not about to give that up," he added, much to the amusement of the audience which comprised businessmen from both countries.

On a more serious note, the Prime Minister was asked whether he was planning to appoint a new Finance Minister before he retires next year. Answering, Dr Mahathir said he was not excluding appointing a second Finance Minister, or even appointing a new one.

"I've thought about this, but I can't share more information with you." Another serious question concerned Thailand's security problems in south Thailand which borders Malaysia. He was asked whether he had any ideas on how to tackle them and if he would share them with the Thai Government.

Drawing from his known comments on the matter, the Prime Minister said one must know the reasons for the people's unhappiness or anger and then try to eliminate them.

The many types of terrorism that exist in the world can be eliminated if the appropriate authorities were to comprehend the problems and then take peaceful remedial steps, he said.

"One must find ways to win the hearts and minds of the affected people. We did that, which explained why we finally overcame our own problems," he said.

A question was also posed as to whether the Prime Minister could suggest ways to strengthen Asean.

He said joint tourism promotion involving two or more countries should be initiated, besides doing a deep study on industrialisation programmes in the region so as to avoid duplication, like steel manufacturing.