

09/07/2002

Dr Mahathir: My turn to give Abdullah strong support

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KUCHING, Mon. - Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today he would fully support Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi after his retirement, to return the support Abdullah had given him throughout his tenure as Prime Minister and Barisan Nasional chairman.

Calling on all quarters in Sarawak to support Abdullah upon his retirement next year, Dr Mahathir said: "I will give the strongest support to Abdullah as the Prime Minister and BN chairman.

"This is how I will repay the support he has given me. It is not proper for me not to support them when I retire, when they have been supporting me all this while."

He said this at the opening of the Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu (PBB) general assembly in Santubong, 50km from here.

The Prime Minister said he was grateful to the support given to him by the people, enabling him to carry out his duties.

Dr Mahathir also reaffirmed his confidence in Abdullah to lead the country.

In an hour-long speech, the Prime Minister explained to the PBB delegates why he had decided to retire.

"I think I am already too long in the Government ... 21 years as the Prime Minister, six years as the Deputy Prime Minister and two years as Minister. I am getting old.

"I am 76 now and going to be 77 soon, and I think it is time to go and give a chance to other people.

"But it doesn't mean I am going to retire completely. I will assist the party when I am needed."

Dr Mahathir also took a swipe at foreign critics who had labelled him a dictator.

"I am the only dictator in the world who has been elected not once but five times.

"They can classify me as a dictator like Stalin and Lenin.

They can call me anything ... Mahafiraun, Mahazalim. I have thick skin.

"What is important for me is my country. We have made progress and people all over the world know where Malaysia is."

Dr Mahathir also urged the people to fully understand the concept of democracy and how it could serve their well-being.

He disagreed that democracy was about changing Governments.

As long as the majority of the people supported the BN, he said, the coalition should continue to be the Government.

Responding to tributes from PBB president Tan Sri Abdul Taib Mahmud and his deputy Tan Sri Alfred Jabu, Dr Mahathir said he owed the success of his leadership to past leaders, including Datuk Onn Jaafar, Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra al-Haj, Tun Abdul Razak Hussein and Tun Hussein Onn.

He thanked Onn for uniting the Malays, Tunku Abdul Rahman for uniting Malaysians of all races under the Alliance, Abdul Razak for developing the rural areas, and also Hussein's contributions.

Dr Mahathir praised Malaysians for their attitude which was the key to the nation's prosperity and stability.

The BN president also thanked PBB for its loyalty to the BN and hoped that Sarawak would remain a bastion of the coalition.

On whether he would reshuffle the Cabinet during the transition period, he said it was possible.

He, however, declined to comment on whether the change in Umno would lead to leadership changes in other BN component parties.