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Dr M persuaded to stay on (HL)

Nuraina A. Samad

KUALA LUMPUR, Sat. - Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today shocked the nation when he suddenly announced his resignation from his political posts. He later withdrew the decision when persuaded to by Umno supreme council members and his family.

When he made the totally unexpected announcement to quit at the end of his winding-up address, his voice choked with emotion. Dr Mahathir is Umno president, Kubang Pasu division chief, Umno treasurer and Barisan Nasional chairman.

His announcement was immediately received with shouts of protest that reverberated through the Merdeka Hall of the Putra World Trade Centre, where the annual party assembly was about to conclude after it began on Thursday.

Members of the supreme council, led by Wanita chief Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz, rushed to Dr Mahathir who was speaking from the left rostrum on the stage.

She was immediately joined by Youth chief Datuk Hishammuddin Hussein and other supreme council members as delegates continued to shout their pleas for Dr Mahathir to stay and continue to lead the party.

Party deputy president Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who was with the other supreme council members to try to persuade Dr Mahathir to change his mind, then went to the right rostrum and asked permission from permanent chairman Tun Sulaiman Ninam Shah to ask the assembly not to accept the resignation.

Sulaiman asked for calm but delegates, all on their feet, continued to plead with Dr Mahathir.

He was adamant that he would not change his mind, shaking his head, his eyes brimming with tears.

The crowd continued chanting Dr Mahathir's name, and sang party songs as they continued their plea.

Dr Mahathir continued weeping and was heard telling supreme council members at the rostrum: "I have decided, I have decided ... too long already."

The supreme council members continued to surround him, holding his hands and patting his shoulders before he was led away.

He was taken to the presidential room adjoining the assembly hall where Abdullah, party secretary-general Tan Sri Khalil Yaakub, all five vice-presidents and information chief Tan Sri Megat Junid Megat Ayub, were joined by Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali and family members to help persuade the party president to stay on.

Also making their way into the room were Datuk Paduka Saleha Mohd Ali, BN secretary-general Tan Sri Mohamed Rahmat and Puteri pro-tem chief Azalina Othman Said.

Party veterans such as former Wanita chief Tan Sri Aishah Ghani, former supreme council member Tan Sri Ghazali Shafie, former Kedah Menteri Besar Tan Sri Osman Aroff as well as Dr Mahathir's personal staff including his physicians - Datuk Dr Zainal Hamid and his assistant - then entered the room.

Another supreme council member, Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, later joined the rest in the room. No newsmen were allowed into the room. Reporters and Press photographers were kept waiting at a distance as they waited to get more news about Dr Mahathir's shock announcement.

The waiting delegates in Merdeka Hall and party members following proceedings on the closed-circuit television and big screens kept chanting Dr Mahathir's name with shouts of "Don't go, we need you".

At about 7pm, an hour after Dr Mahathir made his announcement, Abdullah returned to the Merdeka Hall and addressed the delegates, many of whom were visibly shocked and weeping openly. Calmly, Abdullah said: "We have collectively met Dr Mahathir and he has agreed to withdraw his decision to resign."

The crowd greeted the announcement with shouts of "Hidup Mahathir, Hidup Umno".

Abdullah, accompanied by Khalil, vice-presidents Datuk Seri Najib Razak, Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib and Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, and Megat Junid, went to RTM's mini studio within the PWTC and addressed the nation live just before the 8pm news.

He said: "We have told Dr Mahathir that the assembly has unanimously rejected his decision."

He also appealed to everyone - Umno and Barisan Nasional component party leaders and members - to remain calm in the wake of Dr Mahathir's announcement and to understand that he is still the Prime Minister, Umno president and BN chairman.

Outside the hall, people were in a shock, many weeping. Some broke into song. Some shouted Dr Mahathir's name.

Later, Khalil and the vice-presidents accompanied Dr Mahathir to his car. He left for home with Dr Siti Hasmah and their daughter, Maizura.

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