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Front-page coverage for PM's announcement in local, Singapore media

Balan Moses

DATUK Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's sudden decision to resign sent the nation into shock last week with many unable to accept the fact that the father of modern Malaysia would no longer be at the helm.

The effect was somewhat diluted on Tuesday when the Prime Minister's planned withdrawal from active politics was announced by Deputy Prime Minister and heir apparent, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

The Bahasa Malaysia dailies, the Chinese and Tamil Press, and the Singapore media, gave front-page coverage to the announcement of Dr Mahathir's departure from government and party politics in October next year.

Berita Harian, on Wednesday, said all doubts over Dr Mahathir's resignation had been cleared following the announcement of the date when Dr Mahathir would leave.

In an editorial that advised the nation in general, and Umno members specifically, the newspaper said unity was of utmost importance in ensuring a smooth succession.

It pointed out that a start had already been made with the three Umno vice-presidents supporting Dr Mahathir's succession plan.

For the record, the Prime Minister will hand over all official duties to Abdullah after the Organisation of Islamic Conference meeting on Oct 24 and 25 next year.

Berita Harian said the spirit of unity prevailing within the senior Umno leadership over the succession should filter down to the grassroots.

It also underlined the fact that Dr Mahathir, until he steps down at the end of next year, would effectively lead the nation with Abdullah carrying out his duties as usual as Deputy Prime Minister and deputy Umno president.

The newspaper had, in its editorial on Monday, opined that many had expected Dr Mahathir to announce the withdrawal of his resignation before leaving for Italy on holiday.

This followed Abdullah's statement to this effect soon after Dr Mahathir's emotional announcement of his resignation at the Umno general assembly last Saturday.

Utusan Malaysia said the announcement that Dr Mahathir would only step down next year had somewhat softened the the earlier dramatic announcement to resign.

It also removed much of the uncertainty about the post-Mahathir leadership, columnist Awang Selamat said on Wednesday.

The newspaper thanked God for the opportunity given to the nation to be better prepared for Dr Mahathir's departure from active politics and government service.

The transition period will enable Abdullah to prepare for the duties and responsibilities of Prime Minister, he added.

According to Awang Selamat, the non de plume of the editor, the Prime Minister's quit announcement had silenced critics who had hurled all sorts of allegations against him. The columnist hoped that the transition would allow a smooth handing over of the baton from Dr Mahathir to Abdullah.

A Utusan Malaysia writer on Thursday said Malaysians should respect the wishes of Dr Mahathir who had served the nation for 21 years as Prime Minister.

"Dr Mahathir's wishes at the age of 76 to plan a life henceforth as a

normal Malaysian should be respected although it will be difficult to release him," said the writer.

He exhorted Malaysians to repay Dr Mahathir for his dedication and commitment to the future of the country by working hard for the common good.