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Najib: Abdullah has what it takes to lead the country

KUALA LUMPUR, Wed. - Umno vice-president Datuk Seri Najib Razak today described party deputy president, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, as a man of much experience and one with the right background to lead the country.

He said Abdullah's eventual ascendance next year would provide a degree of stability and continuity which would ensure a smooth transfer of power with the least possible disruption.

He said it would be unrealistic to expect everything to remain the same when the new leadership emerged as there would definitely be a new political dimension.

"Since Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's announcement on his retirement next year, the country has been placed on the political succession mode.

"However, instead of uncertainty and unpredictability, the succession process has been made clear and unambiguous. This is the hallmark of Malaysian political leadership."

Najib, who is Defence Minister, said this in his speech at a dinner organised by the National Press Club.

He said Umno had moved on beyond the 1999 general election with many improvements since then.

However, he said, Umno needed to continue working hard, both within the party and the Malay community.

"Umno must remain to be the only party that can guarantee the success of the Malay community which is changing," he said.

Najib said there were some who claimed to be religious leaders who opposed the Government's forward-looking policies and branded them as being secular and not Islamic despite their enormous success in uplifting the state of the ummah.

"We need to seriously address this dilemma. Umno is a very strong and resilient party and I am confident that we can find our own effective ways to manage these emerging issues."

On the country's economic direction, Najib said a war against Iraq and its impact on oil prices will have untold implications.

"It rekindles the memories of the oil shock of the early 1970s. The fate of the United States economy will also determine the state of the world economy and hence, the regional economies. Such is the interdependent nature of the world today."

He said, recent history had shown that the Malaysian economy was resilient "and with prudent policies, we could manage our own economy".

Najib also praised the local media for its positive role in making and building Malaysia as well as being present in covering and analysing government events and policies.

"Although there will always be a debate between the kind of roles that the media should play, that is in taking an antagonistic stance or a cooperative one. What is important is for the media to be a reflection of society.

"In other words, the media's standing should be in tandem with the society in which it operates. A responsible and responsive media is arguably the best form of journalism," he said.

Later, Najib said Umno should continue with its own image and not emulate Pas in its struggle to win the people's heart.

"Pas is only a superficial Islamic model with no substance. However, people are swayed by its image. We need to convince the people, especially the villagers, about this. Umno has to stand and fight its own battle."

To a question on his position in the succession plan drawn up by Dr Mahathir, Najib said: "We will cross the bridge when we come to it."