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`Transition of power always smooth'

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KUALA LUMPUR, Mon. - Malaysia's transition of power has always been smooth because it is done in a scrupulously constitutional manner, with leaders observing the electoral preferences of their party and the interests of continuity in national governance.

New Straits Times Press (M) Bhd group editor-in-chief Tan Sri Abdullah Ahmad said this was the reason why the country had been able to develop from a post-colonial cast-off into one of the world's most peaceful and prosperous emerging nations.

When negotiating political change, he said, Malaysia did not have to contend with deep socio-political economic trauma unlike in some countries where changes were marked with political uncertainty, social breakdown and economic distress, if not devastation.

"In many places, change without violence and evolution without revolution seem practically impossible.

"Yet here in Malaysia, emerging now from the longest and most far-reaching administration in its history - which is to say managing a transition long loaded with anticipated problems - we are doing so without missing a beat," he said when delivering a talk titled "Recent Developments in Malaysian Politics - What Next?" at an Asian Strategic and Leadership Institute luncheon at the Sheraton Imperial today.

He said Malaysia enjoyed peace and prosperity over the decades because it subscribed to the three C's formula - consultation, compromise and consensus.

Addressing the "what next" poser, Abdullah sketched out the probable scenario with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad remaining in all his present positions until October 2003.

"Over these final 15 months of his tenure, he will likely be seen as much if not more on the international scene as here at home, where much if not most of the day-to-day business of running the Government will go to his deputy, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

"When the appointed day arrives, there will probably be a moving ceremony at the party headquarters as Dr Mahathir formally hands over office to Abdullah."

Touching on Abdullah's successor, he said in a few days the nation should get a broad hint who the Deputy Prime Minister would choose as his deputy when he assumed the Prime Ministership in October next year.

He said the choice would not offend Dr Mahathir's and the party's wishes as expressed through Umno's own democratic processes.

"Umno has traditionally preferred a named successor rather than the messy competition of an open field. This is obviously good for party unity and it has learned well from a history of hard-fought contests."

The Deputy Prime Minister had said that he would make his successor known after the Pendang and Anak Bukit by-elections.

"He cannot be too subtle - which would fuel speculation and a scramble for position - or too blatant - which would mean that the decision had been made for him.

"He could also say nothing and wait for new alignments to take shape," he said.

Abdullah said although Dr Mahathir's influence might seem decisive - the Prime Minister had hinted at Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak - the prerogative remained with the Deputy Prime Minister.

Declaring that he had no favourites, Abdullah felt the important thing was the establishment of a clear pattern based on a party ranking built on popularity, experience and ability in which disruptive surprise challenges could be pre-empted.

"For me, the major consideration is a scrupulous adherence to hierarchy - a clear pecking order that carries the endorsement of the delegate floor."

However, Abdullah opined that gauging party support was more difficult than it used to be as Umno was more fractious today than it was at the time of Tunku Abdul Rahman and Tun Abdul Razak Hussein.

The Deputy Prime Minister, according to Abdullah, as all party presidents have before him, must balance his choice between the candidate who could win the most votes and the one he could work best with.

"He is, after all, not going to be an interim president, as some may have desired.

"He will need the full backing of the party behind him, as well as his Number Two.

"If the Number One post can be negotiated 16 months in advance, the same rationale can be used for Number Two, or do what Dr Mahathir did in 1981 - let the delegates choose the Number Two, man or woman."

On the likely outcome of the next general election, Abdullah was sure the moderate middle of Malaysia would rise again to save the day from the extremist fringes of the country's multi-cultural population.

"This may not mean that Pas will be eliminated, but it should re-send the message that Malaysia will always cherish the middle ground of moderation and inclusiveness above all, and that no matter how the wheel may turn, in this place the centre can and will continue to hold."