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Rafidah: Stop speculating on the next DPM

KUALA LUMPUR, Thurs. - Party leaders should work on governing the country instead of speculating who will be appointed Deputy Prime Minister when Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi takes over as Prime Minister in 16 months.

Wanita Umno head Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz said speculation would only destroy the party, adding that party members should instead support Dr Mahathir and his deputy, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

Yesterday, Dr Mahathir said he had to give in to calls from those who succeed him to continue serving for the next 16 months although he wanted to retire earlier.

"Actually, if I'm no longer Prime Minister, Pak Lah (Abdullah) would be the Prime Minister today and perhaps Najib (Defence Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak) would be Deputy Prime Minister, but they are willing to wait 16 months to get the posts," he had said.

Asked to comment on Dr Mahathir's statement, Rafidah said he (Dr Mahathir) did not say it in the context of naming who would be the next Deputy Prime Minister.

"If you analyse it like that, then that is speculation. Even Najib is not comfortable with the speculation.

"In the end, speculation will only destroy the party. Show support for Dr Mahathir and Pak Lah, and the rest will come in time," she said after attending the Hadiyah Sastera 2001 organised by the Utusan Group.

She said the choice of Deputy Prime Minister was Abdullah's once he becomes Prime Minister.

"It is Pak Lah's choice as to who he wants as number two; Dr Mahathir has said that, so there should not be any speculation.

"So let us go in and work at governing the country," Rafidah said.

She added that the next 16 months would be a test for party leaders to see who set aside the party for personal gains.

"If they pass the test, their capabilities will shine through," Rafidah said.

She said Umno leaders were a team and had been that way under Dr Mahathir and his success reflected unity in the party and the Government.

"Leaders have to continue the teamwork no matter who is Deputy Prime Minister, and we should accept it if we are for the country."

She advised leaders to calm their supporters and heed Dr Mahathir's advice not to scramble for the post of Deputy Prime Minister.

"Most of the time it is the supporters who are more ambitious than their leaders," Rafidah added.

Meanwhile, Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar, who is Kota Tinggi Umno division chief, said senior Umno leaders had agreed not to struggle for power.

"If the Prime Minister has indicated (that Najib would be the next Deputy Prime Minister), I'm in no position to answer this question. All the leaders have agreed that they will not have a power struggle in Umno... so it is up to the top leadership to decide what their intention would be.

"I think the most important thing is to support the leaders, whatever the decision may be," he said when commenting on Dr Mahathir's statement at his office in Putrajaya.

Other Umno leaders, including the other two vice-presidents Tan Sri

Muhyiddin Yassin and Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib, refused to comment on Dr Mahathir's statement, preferring instead to "keep mum".

They said the issue was "sensitive" and wanted to wait for Dr Mahathir to elaborate further.