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Dr M: Najib most experienced (HL)

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DATUK Seri Najib Tun Razak appears to be the most experienced to be made Deputy Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said, besides the fact that he is the most senior Umno vice-president.

The Prime Minister said this yesterday when asked whether an early indication from him on the position of the next Deputy Prime Minister would be binding or otherwise.

Dr Mahathir was speaking at a Press conference just before leaving for Langkawi after a three-day official visit to Thailand.

He was accompanied by his wife, Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali, Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar, Agriculture Minister Datuk Mohd Effendi Norwawi, several Members of Parliament and senior government officials.

Elaborating, Dr Mahathir said he wanted to ensure a smooth transition of power when he makes his planned exit in October next year, which was why he named Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi as his successor.

Subsequently, at a meeting on Monday with Kubang Pasu Umno division leaders in Seri Perdana, Dr Mahathir hinted that Najib could perhaps be Abdullah's deputy when the time comes.

He again referred to Najib, who is Defence Minister, as a possible candidate when he went to Kedah on Friday.

He nevertheless said the final choice was the sole prerogative of the Prime Minister.

Dr Mahathir reiterated that he wants to avoid a power struggle in Umno and stressed that he wished to see a smooth and effective transition of national political leadership.

He was also asked, now that he has named his successor, what was there to stop him from firmly naming the next Deputy Prime Minister as well.

Dr Mahathir said there might be three or four candidates to choose from, but only one person could fill the post.

There are bound to be disappointments, he said.

"In this case, I thought Najib is the most experienced in Government and senior in the party.

"When I was picked I was the most junior (vice-president), but that was up to the consideration of Tun Hussein Onn (the then Prime Minister).

"Since there won't be party elections next year, I hope the transition can really be smooth."

(Former Selangor Menteri Besar Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib and Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin are the other Umno vice-presidents).

When asked to elaborate on the Umno elections scheduled for next year, Dr Mahathir said there was an "understanding" among supreme council members to postpone the party elections to a later date, so that they could focus on the general election.

The last party election, originally scheduled in 1999, was deferred to 2000 to enable members to prepare for the general election which was held in November 1999.

Dr Mahathir reminded party leaders that they have a duty to serve the nation.

He pointed out that he could have chosen others when appointing a Deputy Prime Minister, but he chose Abdullah instead.

"We are appointed to serve the nation, not individuals," the Prime

Minister said.

Asked what are his plans after retirement, Dr Mahathir said he might write about his experiences and perhaps this could be a reference for others.

In Kuantan, Abdullah said a decision on who would replace him once he took over as Prime Minister next year would only be made known after the Pendang and Anak Bukit by-elections on July 18, reports Ridzwan Abdullah reports.

He said Umno was now working hard for the by-elections and any decision made now on his future successor could affect Barisan Nasional preparations.

"I need some time ...especially since Umno is involved in the coming by-elections," he said after a meeting with the Pahang Umno liaison committee.

Also present were Pahang Umno liaison chief and Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Adnan Yaakob, Najib who is deputy liaison chief, and Umno secretary-general Tan Sri Khalil Yaakob.

Abdullah said he had explained to Pahang Umno that he would make a decision on the matter "as how it was wanted" by the Prime Minister.

"But only after the by-elections, because full concentration should be there. And before I make my final decision, I will discuss (the matter) with the Prime Minister."

He also said he would meet each of the three party vice-presidents before announcing his decision, which, he added, was a normal practice of the Prime Minister himself.