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`MCA must strive for internal unity'

reports on "MCA General Assembly 2002" by Zubaidah Abu Bakar; Patrick PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad yesterday expressed hope that MCA would be able to solve its internal problems and work towards strengthening the Barisan Nasional.

Dr Mahathir, the BN chairman and Umno president, urged the second largest coalition member to strive for internal unity for the sake of the moderate Chinese and the BN.

"I hope this assembly will be able to solve all the internal problems and strengthen Barisan Nasional so that we could contribute positively to the Government and the country," Dr Mahathir said in his opening remarks of his speech at the 49th MCA annual general assembly yesterday.

BN deputy chairman and deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and leaders of component parties were among those present at the assembly.

In his speech, which was considered by MCA delegates as an "early warning" to the escalating racial intolerance in the country, Dr Mahathir also reminded MCA to remain moderate.

"The truth is that only parties which are moderate and strong can form a coalition like BN.

"If we reject moderation and get into disputes within the party or with other component members, the harmony that we experience today will just vanish.

"We will be like many other developing nations which are unstable, not progressive and unsafe," he reminded, adding the opposition parties were radical and intolerant and if they came into power the country would change as had happened in Kelantan and Terengganu under Pas rule.

"The country will become backward and the people will feel pressured.

"There will be no cultural freedom or religious freedom for those who don't share their (opposition's) sentiments," Dr Mahathir said.

He told the MCA delegates: "Don't think that the BN cannot be defeated. It can be defeated not because the opposition parties are stronger or better but because of the weakness of the BN and its component parties ... they will win by default."

Dr Mahathir said the concept and basis of BN were far more important than individuals.

"As you know, I have decided to step down. Nobody pushed me, it is a decision I took myself because I believe the time has come for me to hand over the leadership of Umno and Barisan Nasional to another person.

"By tradition, the deputy president of Umno succeeds the president and so I have endorsed Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi as the president of Umno," Dr Mahathir said, to thunderous applause and shouts of "Hidup Mahathir" from the floor.

He said the change of leadership in the Government was not something which was spelt out in the Federal Constitution but it was a tradition which BN abides by.

He said the smooth transition of power was important for the peace and stability of the nation and as such urged the MCA to uphold the practice.

"I hope MCA will uphold this tradition and give its full support to Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi when he takes over as the fifth Prime Minister of Malaysia," he said.

At a Press conference later, the Prime Minister was asked if he was happy with BN's unity and co-operation.

Expressing his confidence in the coalition, he said BN members can work together for the sake of the nation, putting aside whatever minor differences they may have.

"In the BN, we have no problem. We can work together. As you could see, when I come to an MCA meeting I get the same kind of support that I get from the Umno meeting, they even shout 'Hidup Mahathir'. Can you imagine that?

"When I was first appointed (as Umno president and Prime Minister) everybody said, 'My God! What is going to happen?', but now they say 'My God! He is going to step down.' So things have changed!" he remarked.