

Mahathir will decide on acting CM

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KOTA KINABALU: Chief Minister Datuk Chong Kah Kiat said yesterday that someone will be appointed to act in his place if he goes on leave before the end of his two-year term.

He said the decision on who would be acting chief minister would be made by Prime Minister and Barisan Nasional chairman Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

"I have applied for leave from the beginning of March," said Chong, the Liberal Democratic Party president whose term under the rotation system ends on March 27.

He took over the chief minister's post from Datuk Osu Sukam, who was the then Sabah Umno chief, in 2001.

Under a revision of the rotation system, a Muslim bumiputra leader will take over as chief minister after each two-year term of a Chinese or a non-Muslim bumiputra chief minister.

The next chief minister will be from Sabah Umno.

Political circles are speculating that Sabah Umno chief Datuk Musa Aman, who is state Finance Minister, is tipped for the job.

Other names mentioned are Minister in the Chief Minister's Department Datuk Abdul Ghapur Salleh and Deputy Chief Minister Datuk Lajim Ukin.

Sabah Barisan politicians, however, do not rule out the possibility of a surprise appointment.

Chong, when approached by reporters at a Hari Raya Aidiladha function of Yang di-Pertua Negeri Datuk Ahmadshah Abdullah at Istana Negeri, declined to talk about a news report alleging he had sought an extension of his term.

"Dr Mahathir has clarified the matter. For me, it's a small matter. There is a small group which likes to play on the issue," he said.

Dr Mahathir described the report as "mischievous", adding that Chong had, during their meeting, requested leave before the end of his term.

Chong met Dr Mahathir and his deputy, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, during a trip to Kula Lumpur on Thursday.