

Full backing

STAR 16 JUN 2003

Pak Lah: Top Umno leaders will endorse my choice of deputy

BY NICK LEONG

SERDANG: Umno leaders, from the vice-presidents to state liaison committee chiefs, have pledged to endorse whoever Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi picks as his deputy to avoid a power struggle after Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad steps down in October.

Abdullah, who is Deputy Prime Minister and Umno deputy president, said the party leaders had conveyed this message to him during his meetings with them in the past.

"What I want to say is that Umno leaders at all levels have agreed to let me decide and announce in due time who my deputy will be.

"They told me that whoever I chose, they would accept," he told reporters after opening the Mega Unity programme organised by the National Unity and Social Development Ministry at Universiti Putra Malaysia yesterday.

He said the Umno leaders included vice-presidents Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib, secretary-general Tan Sri Khalil Yaakob and information chief Tan Sri Megat Junid Megat Ayob.

He said the leaders of Wanita Umno, Umno Youth and Puteri Umno and all state liaison committee chiefs had also made a similar pledge to him.

Dr Mahathir had said that he would be stepping down as Prime Minister and Umno president in October, handing over the reins of the country and the party to Abdullah.

The Umno president, during an interview with *Utusan Malaysia* published yesterday, had expressed the fear that party leaders would jostle for the vacant deputy president's post after Abdullah takes over from him.

Abdullah said he shared Dr Mahathir's fear of Umno leaders jostling for posts in the party.

"That is why we are taking steps to avoid this, to get the assurances of the leaders (that they will support whoever is made deputy president)," he said.

Asked if any Umno leader had campaigned for the post, Abdullah said it should not happen because they had given their word to him.

"When they have already agreed to let me decide, why should they campaign?" he asked.

Abdullah said Umno leaders should remember that the enemy of the party was not their colleagues but the opposition parties.

"Our competitors are the opposition parties and the real battle is the general election. That is the real fight, not in the party," he said.

Muhyiddin: I'll support Abdullah on his choice

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In Johor Baru, Muhyiddin pledged to give his fullest support to Abdullah on his choice.

Speaking to reporters at the Johor Umno Convention 2003 yesterday, he said that Dr Mahathir should not have any fear that there would be a tussle for the deputy's post.

"I personally will respect any decision by (Datuk Seri) Abdullah on the matter. I have confidence in his wisdom in running the party as well as the country," he said.

He agreed that in order to protect party unity and the political stability of the country, the post should not be contested.

"However, this does not mean Umno is being undemocratic or breaking away from tradition.

"Maybe we can start a new tradition by supporting those appointed as Deputy Prime Minister and allow him to hold the number two post in Umno without a challenge," he said.

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