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Mahathir-Interview

I WOULD HAVE QUIT ON JUNE 22 LAST YEAR, SAYS MAHATHIR

PUTRAJAYA, Oct 14 (Bernama -- Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today he would have quit his post as Prime Minister on June 22 last year had he been allowed to complete his unfinished speech at the Umno General Assembly then.

Dr Mahathir said he was already prepared to step down on that day itself.

In an exclusive interview with Bernama here -- his last interview with the media before he retires as Prime Minister and Umno president on Oct 31 -- he recounted details of the remaining page of his speech which was left uncompleted because Umno Supreme Council members, overcome by emotion, surrounded him and overcome by emotion himself, he did not get to read the last parts of his hand-written speech.

Asked if his resignation would still take effect at the end of this month had he been allowed to complete his speech, he said: "No, no, no. If I had been allowed it would have been my last official function that day itself.

"I would step down that day itself. I considered of course to continue because there were appeals, including the appeal from Pak Lah (Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi) who wanted me to stay. If he had said no and that he was ready to take over and all that, I would have stepped down.

"Yes, had I been allowed to continue.... I was already prepared to step down that day itself," he said.

Dr Mahathir said if he had been allowed to finish his speech, he had wanted to explain that he would be letting go of all roles in the party and Government as well as to explain that he had stayed on till then because he wanted to put the party and economy in order.

Reiterating that he had originally intended to retire in 1998, Dr Mahathir said that the economic crisis and the problem he had with his then deputy, Datuk Seri) Anwar Ibrahim, had prevented him from doing so. "So I stayed back," he said.

Last year, when the Umno General Assembly was held, Dr Mahathir said he felt he had managed to put the party back in order and the economy was also on the right track, and, therefore, it was the right time for him to leave.

"That is all I wanted to say, nothing sensational," he said.

And he would have left, he said, had Abdullah told him that he (Abdullah) was ready to take over.

"If I had been allowed it would have been my last official function (on) that day itself... I would have stepped down that day itself."

But he only agreed to continue until after the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and OIC Summits because people including Abdullah wanted him to stay.

During the June 22 assembly, Dr Mahathir's voice broke just as he announced his intention to retire. Members of the Supreme Council rushed to the rostrum and crying, told him he could not step down.

The prime minister, who did not get to finish his speech, was then ushered into a waiting room while Abdullah tabled an emergency resolution urging delegates to reject Dr Mahathir's resignation. The delegates unanimously endorsed the resolution.

The following day, Abdullah led a delegation of the party's top supreme council members to meet Dr Mahathir and appealed to him to stay on. It was then that Dr Mahathir agreed to leave only after the OIC Summit.

Dr Mahathir was also asked why he chose the Umno General Assembly to announce his resignation.

The Prime Minister said he had tried telling his senior colleagues individually of his intention to step down. But each time he brought the subject up, they would tell him he could not do it.

" I told Tan Sri Khalil (Umno secretary-general) that I wanted to resign but he said no.. no..don't resign.

" I thought that if I don't make a public announcement,people will not think I'm serious. (By making) a public announcement especially at an Umno caucus, which I regard as the most important forum for me, then there would be no going back.

"By making a public announcement,if I retract, my credibility would be gone."

Asked why he was adamant about quitting as planned despite appeals by Malaysians from all walks of life for him to stay on, he said:" One of the things I was taught when I was small was that I should not overstay if I go to a person's house. You must get the feel about whether people still want you to stay or not, so don't overstay your welcome".

" So it's the same with being in authority, if I overstay my welcome and wait until people hate me then I step down, then it won't be very nice".

Dr Mahathir was also asked why he did not seem to be obsessed with power although he holds a very powerful position as prime minister.

" Power or authority is necessary in order to enable you to carry out certain things. Had I not been Prime Minister I would not be able to do things. I had many experiences where perfectly good suggestions were turned down as not possible or foolish or whatever".

" But when I became prime minister then I can carry through my own suggestions. So I became more effective. That power is used in order to do things for the country, not for yourself. If you do things for yourself people will hate you", he said.

The prime minister said he was stepping down although at the same time he had spoken about his "unfinished business".

" There will always be unfinished business. If you were to wait until you finish all your business, you will never step down.

" So I am resigned to the fact that I have to leave even if I can't finish the business and hopefully the people who succeed me will carry on", he said.

Asked why he did not wait until after the next general election to do so, he said there would always be one general election after another in the country.

" There will be general election and general election. If we finish one election we'll have to wait for another ... you'll never step down".

Dr Mahathir pointed out that he was stepping down now to give the new leadership sufficient time to take over and to lead effectively.

That was why he wanted to step down in June last year, half-way through the five-year electoral term.

" I have already told myself that I would help (campaign in the election).

The prime minister was also asked to comment on Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf's views that he had become become public property and could not retire from the international stage because he had a lot to contribute to the Muslim world.

" If I am required to do anything that is productive, yes I will be willing to contribute, not in an official position because I will not be able to have the kind of authority that I have in Malaysia as prime minister.

" So the only contributions that I can make is maybe ideas. I feel that my contribution even in Malaysia is in terms of ideas ...not so much authority as ideas. Authority is necessary in order to implement ideas. Without ideas authority is useless, so that's my contributions".

-- BERNAMA

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