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Goh-Mahathir

POST-MAHATHIR M'SIA A GOOD SHIP, SAYS GOH

SINGAPORE, Oct 21 (Bernama) -- Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong has expressed optimism over post-Mahathir Malaysia and lauded his counterpart for having developed "solid foundations" for his successor to build on.

In an interview with the Bangkok Post published yesterday, the Straits Times quoted him as saying that Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad "is leaving behind a good ship with good officers and an engine working very well."

As such, his successor, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, should be able to carry on with the process "without too much difficulty", he said.

Goh also described Abdullah, who takes over at the helm at the end of this month, as a capable leader whose abilities have been underestimated by observers.

"Most people have underestimated Abdullah Badawi, in my estimation. I think that he has much more than what people think he is capable of," he said.

"I see him being able to lead Malaysia upwards along the development path, noting that "the challenges I think he will face include the challenge from PAS. That's a political challenge."

Goh also noted that the country's new leader would also have to restructure Malaysia's economy in order to compete with others from outside the region.

He was nonetheless "optimistic about Malaysia and I am not concerned about the transition."

Adding to his views on leadership in the region and the challenges that countries would face, he said the main one would be in restructuring economies to compete against the likes of India and China.

"All of a sudden, you have two gigantic factories. These are not just factories producing cheap goods, but they produce a range of goods from low to high value," he said.

He said that such countries would, over time, be able to provide services -- medical, for example -- that were cheaper than what is now available in say, Singapore or Thailand.

But Goh is optimistic about prospects for the Asean region, especially over the next year, given the growth now being seen in the United States.

He did not want however, to look beyond next year for the moment, saying: "I would move a year at a time and continue restructuring the economies and the longer term competitiveness -- and in the meantime take steps like FTAs (Free Trade Agreements) with China, Japan and India to create an East Asian community.

"These are bold steps but you will not see the results until 2020," he said.

He also told the Thai daily that Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra had the qualities to take on the mantle of leadership in Asean given the upcoming political transitions taking place in the region.

Goh said Thaksin, not only has confidence in himself and Thailand, but also has "ideas for Thailand and Asean."

"I think, he realises the importance of integrating Thailand with the other Asean countries, like Singapore had done earlier, in order to create a bigger market to help Thailand become a developed country," he said.

-- BERNAMA

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