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Abdullah: My aim to hand over strong Umno

KUALA LUMPUR, Mon. - Acting Umno president Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said tonight he hoped to hand over a strong Umno to his successor, just like what former president Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad had done.

The Prime Minister expressed this intention at an appreciation dinner hosted by the party for Dr Mahathir at the Putra World Trade Centre here. "God had fulfilled Dr Mahathir's wish to hand over a strong party to his successor.

"Umno today is a strong and respected party. This was proven in the last general election where Umno candidates won many seats.

"When the time comes for me to hand over the party leadership, Umno will also be a strong party," said Abdullah, who took over the helm when Dr Mahathir stepped down as the party's fifth president on Oct 31.

The thank you dinner, in appreciation of the former Prime Minister's contributions to the party he led for more than 22 years, was attended by more than 3,000 party leaders and representatives from Umno's 191 divisions.

Present were Dr Mahathir's wife Tun Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali, party vice-presidents Datuk Seri Najib Razak, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin and Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib, Wanita chief Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz, Youth chief Datuk Hishammuddin Hussein and Puteri chief Datuk Azalina Othman Said.

Dr Mahathir, 78, has been an Umno member since the party's inception in 1946 and took over the post of party president from the late Tun Hussein Onn in 1981.

It was during the 1981 Umno general assembly that Dr Mahathir, in his first speech at the assembly as party president, made a pledge to hand over a party that was strong to his successor.

Dr Mahathir said tonight's event was meaningful to him as it was the first time he had had the opportunity to meet with a large number of Umno leaders and members after Umno's outstanding performance in the general election.

Congratulating Abdullah on Umno's and Barisan Nasional's victory, he said the strong mandate given by the people was testimony that Abdullah was the right person to have succeeded him.

On the forthcoming party elections, he said he believed party members were mature and would know what was best for the party.

"The party will always be our priority in whatever we do," he said.

Earlier, Umno secretary-general Tan Sri Khalil Yaakob described Dr Mahathir as a statesman who had brought many changes to Umno, the people and the country.

He said under Dr Mahathir's leadership, Umno's membership grew to 2.18 million, and the divisions and branches increased to 191 and 19,000 respectively. "When Dr Mahathir took over the party leadership, there were 872,796 members, 114 divisions and 5,870 branches."

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