

09/01/2004

Najib quashes talk of split in Umno

M.K. Megan

PETALING JAYA, Thurs. - Datuk Seri Najib Razak today quashed speculation that there would be a split in Umno following his appointment as Deputy Prime Minister yesterday.

He said statements of support for his appointment by Umno leaders, particularly his two Umno vicepresidential colleagues, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin and Tan Sri Muhammad Taib, were proof enough that the party was stable and that its members would continue to work together as a team.

Muhyiddin and Muhammad were among many Umno leaders who welcomed Najib's appointment and pledged support for his leadership.

There has been talk in Umno circles and in the Internet Press that supporters of Muhyiddin were unhappy that he had not been chosen to be Deputy Prime Minister.

"I have known both Tan Sri Muhyiddin and Tan Sri Muhammad for a long time and we have no problems working together," he said.

Najib also dismissed questions on whether the said unhappiness could cause a split within the Umno ranks.

He said that followers usually took the cue from the leaders but in this case, the leaders had pledged support and promised to work as a team. As such, he believed that such speculation would remain as speculation.

Najib was speaking at the Royal Malaysian Air Force base in Subang this morning after seeing off Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi who left for Jakarta on a one-day visit.

Muhyiddin said yesterday that Abdullah's choice of Najib as the number two would complement the Prime Minister's job of governing the country.

Last June, at the Umno general assembly, Muhyiddin and Muhammad had openly pledged before the delegates that they would support anyone Abdullah chose and would not challenge the decision.

The annual delegates conference is the party's highest decision-making platform and any pledge made is deemed sacrosanct.

Najib also said there was no provision in the Umno constitution for the appointment of an acting deputy president as Abdullah was still the elected deputy. Abdullah is acting Umno president, a post he assumed following the retirement of former party president Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad last October. Both Abdullah and Najib are expected to be confirmed as the party's number one and two at the annual delegates conference later this year.

Asked about the possibility of the general election being held soon, Najib said that decision was solely the prerogative of the Prime Minister. The party, however, was working hard in preparing for the elections.

Asked to comment on the congratulatory notes from United States and France on his appointment, Najib said Abdullah had stated that Malaysia's foreign policy was "to be friendly with as many countries as possible, including the US".

"We can differ on certain specific policy issues but that does not mean we cannot collaborate and co-operate in other aspects," he said.

In recent months, Malaysia has had policy differences with the US, particularly on the Bush administration's invasion of Iraq.