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The Prime Minister and I (HL)

Kalimullah Hassan

KUALA LUMPUR, Fri. - Datuk Seri Najib Razak today said his appointment as Deputy Prime Minister is "the beginning of a wonderful relationship" with his boss, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

Speaking for the first time about his bond with Abdullah, Najib said one of the first things he said to the Press when his appointment was announced was that he would be loyal to Abdullah.

"I have no grandiose ideas to undermine him.

"I will continue to pledge my loyalty to him for three reasons. The first is to remind myself that I am number two and must be loyal to my boss. Secondly, I am also addressing my supporters as well so that they don't have grand ideas. And thirdly, it is to remind those who think that they can split Pak Lah and me that they will not succeed," he said.

In a frank interview at his residence in Jalan Duta, Najib, dressed casually in a T-shirt and in between greeting a stream of well-wishers, addressed questions about his rapport with the Prime Minister whom some of his supporters previously perceived as a "rival".

In 1998, after the sacking of former Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, both Abdullah and Najib, being senior vice-presidents of Umno, were seen as the most likely candidates to be considered for the number two job.

Then Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad chose Abdullah to be his deputy in January 1999 and this caused disappointment among Najib's supporters.

Najib debunked such perceptions, saying that he had never taken things for granted. "I hope Datuk Seri Abdullah will have confidence in me as his deputy."

Najib said he felt very comfortable in the Prime Minister's presence. "I always treat him with great respect. The warmth and sincerity emanating from him makes me feel he is genuine and sincere in whatever he does.

"I look forward to working hard for him because we want to make Malaysia a greater place; (and) put it on the world map," he said.

He added: "I already feel the trust. I feel that it is present in our relationship."

Najib said he would also work very hard to ensure the success of the Prime Minister's agenda as outlined in the policy initiatives announced.

"My job and responsibility is to achieve his agenda. That is the primary duty of the Deputy Prime Minister," he said.

Najib said those who studied Malaysian political history would know that major up-heavals were caused by rifts between the number one man and his deputy.

"I want to dispel any perception that this will happen between the Prime Minister and me. This country needs a strong and effective partnership. If relations are sour, then that signals a precursor to a rift," he said, adding that he would be totally loyal to Abdullah.

Abdullah became Prime Minister on Oct 31 last year following Dr Mahathir's retirement. The two most likely candidates for the job were Najib, the most senior Umno vice-president, and newly-appointed Agriculture Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, the second of the party's three vice-presidents. The third, Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib, was not in the running because he is not a Member of Parliament.

Although Dr Mahathir had initially said he felt Najib was the best

choice as Abdullah's deputy, he later said Abdullah had the prerogative as Prime Minister to decide based on whom he thought he could best work with. Abdullah appointed Najib as his deputy on Jan 7.