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Abdullah gets backing from all Umno leaders on choice of DPM

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SERDANG, Sun. - All Umno leaders have assured Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi that they will support his choice of successor when he takes over as Prime Minister.

This, Abdullah said, would avert any infighting for the deputy presidency in the party. (The Umno deputy president is by convention the Deputy Prime Minister.)

"All party leaders - the vice-presidents, heads of the Youth, Wanita and Puteri movements, supreme council members, party secretary-general and State liaison chiefs - have assured me that they will accept whoever I select as the new DPM," he said.

Abdullah said he shared Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's worry that infighting would erupt for the Umno deputy president's and the vice-presidents' posts in the party elections next year.

"But I have been given the assurance by all the leaders - without exception."

He said they had promised him that the choice for the Deputy Prime Minister would be left to him.

"I will announce it after I take over, and whoever I select, they will accept," he said at a Press conference after launching the National Unity and Social Development Ministry's Mega Perpaduan (Mega Unity) 2003 carnival at Universiti Putra Malaysia here.

He was asked about Dr Mahathir's comments in an interview with a Malay newspaper today.

Dr Mahathir had voiced his fears that a power struggle to succeed Abdullah would take place in the Umno elections next year.

Abdullah will become Prime Minister after Dr Mahathir leaves office in October.

By convention, the party president and deputy president become the country's Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister.

Dr Mahathir had also expressed his worry that there would be a struggle for the vice-presidents' posts.

"We have to try to prevent this (infighting)."

With this promise from Umno leaders, Abdullah said there should be no more reason for factions to lobby for the deputy president's post.

"There should be no more squabbling."

"They have agreed to let me choose, what else is there to campaign?"

"They have promised to support whoever I select."

Asked if he would take this as a mandate from the Umno leaders, Abdullah said:

"I asked them about their opinions and they have promised me, so this is according to their wish."

He reiterated that the party needed to close ranks to prepare for the general election.

"The real battle is against the Opposition in the election. It is not within the party."

"We have to prepare for this instead of fighting among ourselves for positions," he said.