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Abdullah to set polls date (HL)

KUALA LUMPUR, Wed. - Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today shot down speculation that he would call a general election before he steps down in October.

Telling Reuters in an interview that there was no chance of an election before he left office, Dr Mahathir said the election date would be decided by his successor, Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

Speculation has been widespread, not only among the Opposition but also Umno and other Barisan Nasional component parties, that Dr Mahathir might opt to lead one last election campaign to hand his successor, Abdullah, a victory.

While speculation on an election being called before Dr Mahathir steps down in October has been rife, numerous quarters had dismissed the notion on the basis of the Prime Minister having declared he would not stand as a candidate.

"It can be quite difficult to hold the general election before Dr Mahathir steps down," a senior political analyst told the New Straits Times.

"If it is held, say in June as widely speculated, and Dr Mahathir holds fast to his promise of not wanting to contest, in what capacity is he going to serve the Government between June and October?"

"Furthermore, October was set as the date for him to step down so as to enable him to attend the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) in his capacity as Prime Minister.

"If the general election is held earlier and Dr Mahathir steps down earlier too, then it beats the whole purpose of asking him to stay until October."

As the last general election was held in November 1999, the BN Government has until January 2005 to hold the next, given the five-year term plus the 60-day grace period.

Dr Mahathir announced his resignation at the Umno general assembly in June last year.

However, on the urging of Umno and BN component leaders, he agreed to stay on until October, and he named Abdullah to succeed him then.

Umno vice-president Tan Sri Muhammad Taib said there was no need for speculation on whether the election would be held before or after Dr Mahathir stepped down.

"For Umno and BN supporters, before or after is immaterial.

"What should be important is for all of us to ensure our party and BN are strong and ready to enter the election at any time."

Muhammad also said that Dr Mahathir had made it clear he would step down in October and be succeeded by Abdullah.

"If Dr Mahathir has stepped down, obviously, the election date will be decided by his successor," he added.