

26/06/2003

'No-contest tradition practical'

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KUALA LUMPUR, Wed. - Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's emphasis on the Umno tradition where the deputy president takes over the presidency and a vice-president takes over the post of the deputy is within the traditional Malay view of leadership and permuafakatan (close co-operation).

New Straits Times Press group editor-in-chief Tan Sri Abdullah Ahmad, who said this today, added that this tradition, which also included the Umno general assembly endorsing the new president's choice of his deputy, emphasised harmony and peaceful transition, thus avoiding confrontation and conflict.

"This is in direct contrast to the adversarial nature of the elective principle in Western democracy," he said at a talk on leadership organised by JP Morgan Chase Bank Bhd in conjunction with the JP Morgan Global Leadership Day at the Equatorial Hotel here.

He said Dr Mahathir's emphasis on the tradition also involved a very practical consideration because there had been dire consequences for the party when this particular Umno tradition was broken.

"The 1987 challenges to the presidency and deputy presidency split the party in two, caused it to be declared an illegal organisation and forced it to be reconstituted. This is why Dr Mahathir has always believed that democracy without a strong party is meaningless," Abdullah said.

It was also a strong and united party that Dr Mahathir would be bequeathing to Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, his designated successor, he added.

He said in successfully promoting a no-contest mood within Umno, Dr Mahathir had demonstrated his leadership prowess yet again.

"It is not enough that a leader meets the expectations of his followers. The true mark of a leader is when his followers trust him even if he takes an unusual course of action.

"Over 22 years as president of Umno and Prime Minister, Dr Mahathir has passed this test on more than one occasion."

Abdullah said Dr Mahathir's move to create a no-contest mood and an orderly transition of leadership would be seen by his critics as just another example of his "authoritarian streak".

They also charged, he said, that denying the Umno general assembly its prerogative to elect its top two leaders was to compromise its democratic underpinnings.

"But I prefer to view this as just another example of how Malaysian society has altered and transformed borrowings from abroad by adapting them to its own traditions, history and culture.

"Dr Mahathir views democracy through the eyes of a pragmatist rather than an idealist," he said.

Abdullah said Dr Mahathir's promotion of Asian values and his critique of globalisation were part of the same world view which insisted that Western ideals and institutions should neither be imposed on the Third World by force, nor adopted wholesale without regard to the conditions of a particular society.

He said leadership today imposed a heavy responsibility and it had to involve the building of trust, mutual respect, confidence and even affection.

"In politics, especially, the consent of the led must be obtained by the

honesty of hard work, not by easy speechifying, fancy slogans or empty charisma, bogus personality and holier-than-thou posture."