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'BN candidates can be veterans or new faces'

PUTRAJAYA, Wed. - Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said today Barisan Nasional candidates in the next general election can be either veterans or new faces as they will be selected based on their ability to win seats.

"What's important is to choose capable candidates who can get the support of voters and the rakyat," he said after visiting the Expo OIC 2003 in Precinct 5 here.

Abdullah was asked to respond to remarks Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad made in an interview with Bernama yesterday that veteran BN politicians who have been around for a long time should make way for new faces.

Dr Mahathir, who steps down as Prime Minister as well as Umno president and BN chairman on Oct 31, also said they should give a chance to new faces and also help campaign for these new candidates in the next general election.

The advice has received the support of community leaders, non-governmental organisations and MPs who described it as timely.

They were of the view that giving young people the chance to lead the country augured well for the country's development.

Abdullah said he viewed Dr Mahathir's advice as a sincere reminder.

On BN incumbents willing to give way to new faces, he said he would welcome such a move, but he said to date, no incumbent had come forward offering not to contest.

On the criteria of candidates, he said there was room for new faces to become candidates, adding that this was a good development for BN. He added that the new faces would comprise both men and women candidates.

In Kuala Lumpur, Gerakan president Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik, while agreeing that "Dr Mahathir had a point", said veteran Barisan Nasional politicians would have to assess their own usefulness in contributing to their respective parties before deciding to step down.

"They have to also assess the need for them to stay on. If everything is stable and they feel they can step down, they should do so and let new players take over," he added.

Dr Lim, who is Primary Industries Minister, has been Gerakan president since 1980. He has been asked many times on when he would be stepping down and has always maintained that he would do so when the time is right and when party members no longer need him.

Wanita Umno chief Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz said Dr Mahathir's statement was to ensure a smooth transition of BN wakil rakyat and to reduce bickering among party members who might jostle for the leaders they support.

Rafidah, who is International Trade and Industry Minister, said the coalition needed a combination of experienced and new wakil rakyat who would work together in winning the general election.

"The experienced leaders must train, teach and groom the younger leaders, give them time to learn and after that these senior leaders should phase themselves out.

"The PM is not saying they should retire today. He's saying that retirement should be in our agenda."

Rafidah said the leaders should retire out of their own free will and once retired, they should continue supporting party candidates to ensure

victory in the elections.

"These veteran leaders have many supporters and they can garner votes for the party's candidates.

"It doesn't mean when we are retired, we stop contributing to the party. They must come back and give support to the party's candidates."

Rafidah was Wanita Umno chief from 1984 until she lost to Datuk Dr Siti Zaharah Sulaiman in 1996. In the 2000, she recaptured the post, defeating Dr Siti Zaharah.

In Kuching, Sarawak Deputy Chief Minister Tan Sri Dr George Chan Hong Nam, calling on veteran BN politicians to ponder over Dr Mahathir's advice, said, however, that they should step down only if they had outlived their usefulness.

Dr Chan, who is Finance and Public Utilities Minister as well as Industrial Development Minister, said the best time to retire may not be the same for everybody.

"We do not change (leader) for the sake of changing, and the need for a change is not the same for everybody. The Prime Minister has a personal life as well, and he deserves to take a rest and no one can force him to change his decision," he said today.

Sarawak Chief Minister Tan Sri Abdul Taib Mahmud, who has served 40 years in various capacities in the Government, was not available for comment.

Negeri Sembilan Menteri Besar Tan Sri Mohamed Isa Abdul Samad, when met at Seri Negeri, the State administrative building, after chairing the State Executive Council meeting, refused to comment.

MIC president Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu indicated that he would be issuing a statement.