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Party may review election ethics code

reports on "Umno General Assembly 2003" by Noor Adzman Baharuddin; UMNO will study the possibility of tightening its election code of ethics to prevent disunity and bickering which can weaken the party, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said yesterday.

The Prime Minister and Umno president, however, stressed that ethics alone were not enough to ensure discipline if there were people who chose to disobey rules.

On the possibility of the party constitution being amended to limit the president's tenure as one way of avoiding tussles, he said unity in Umno was not based solely on regulations.

Speaking at a Press conference at the end of the second day of the Umno 54th general assembly at the Putra World Trade Centre, he said:

"I believe our code of ethics is sufficient to decide how long the president can stay on."

In jest, he added: "If too short, I would not have the chance ... thankfully it was not."

Dr Mahathir, who has been leading the country and party for 22 years, drew laughter when he quipped: "Why? You don't like me ... You want to shorten it ... Just imagine, how much I cannot do just because it is shortened."

Asked if it was possible for the Deputy Prime Minister to be automatically appointed as Umno deputy president, he said there was no need for it.

"We have not made it a ruling ... it is sufficient for it to remain a tradition," he said, and in a word of caution, stressed that traditions should be observed although sometimes people chose to break them.

To a question on former Umno deputy president Tun Ghafar Baba's suggestion that the post of deputy president be contested, Dr Mahathir said: "We have our process which I went through."

"When Tun Hussein (Onn) appointed me as Deputy Prime Minister, the post of deputy president was not filled until the party elections."

"So, my position then was that of acting deputy party president."

Asked if he agreed with Ghafar's suggestion, he said it would not make much difference, but in his case, matters were made easier because he was not challenged when he was nominated for the deputy president's post.

On the possibility of tightening the eligibility for those contesting top party posts, Dr Mahathir said it was worth considering.

On the suggestion from Penang Umno Youth that the Chief Minister's post be given to a Malay to better resolve the problems faced by the community in the State, Dr Mahathir said: "We gave it to a Malay in Kelantan ... (Malay interest) is still not being championed."

"It is not an issue of who but the way we manage our work."

"I think it is not a problem and we will think of ways to safeguard the interests of the Malays in Penang."

Dr Mahathir was also asked whether Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi - who announced during an earlier Press conference that he would name the next Deputy Prime Minister in November - had consulted him on his (Abdullah) choice, he replied:

"What's the need to ask about this ... I'll resign at the end of October."

To a poser on the future of the New Economic Policy and its affirmative measures favouring the Bumiputeras, Dr Mahathir said: "In the case of

university entry, we have already decided it should be based on merit, so people are beginning to adjust to that (need to compete).

"In the business sector, whether we can do that or not, it is something we have to study."

On Malaysia attaining Vision 2020, the Prime Minister said it was still possible to achieve a developed nation status although the country suffered setbacks like the currency crisis, the Sept 11 attacks and the recent Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome outbreak.

"But there are things beyond our control ... we didn't have or invent SARS, we didn't crash our airplanes into the World Trade Centre but when these things happened, they put a brake on our progress.

"Otherwise, we would have done very well," he said, adding that it was still possible for the country to register an average growth rate of seven per cent over the next 17 years.

Dr Mahathir was also asked if Malaysia's economy and inflow of investments would be hurt due to his remarks against Europeans during his presidential address yesterday.

"Well, I believe in calling a spade a spade, I have always done that and I think other people say the same thing (about Europeans) except that they call them by different names.

"Some call them foreigners, big powers, white people and such, but actually what they mean is Europeans."

Dr Mahathir said the Europeans should not be hurt or retaliate just because he used the right word.

"They have used the right word about us for a long long time ... they are okay... freedom of speech, you know," he said.