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Dr Mahathir: Support Abdullah in his choice of deputy

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TUN Dr Mahathir Mohamad expressed confidence that Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi would make the right decision in his choice of deputy, and urged full support for the Prime Minister's decision.

"He is entitled to choose his deputy and I want the people to support his decision," Dr Mahathir said during a dialogue with Malaysian students here on Monday.

He noted some people were worried Abdullah had not named his deputy but said "that is his right", adding that he himself had chosen his own deputies, "all four of them".

Calling on the rakyat to support the Barisan Nasional Government, he said he would always be a supporter of the BN and would campaign for the Government during elections.

He said that even though he may not agree with some of the decisions made by the Government, he would never seek to undermine it.

Dr Mahathir, who had planned a quiet holiday in London after a trip to Rome, could not resist the call to meet Malaysian students here, especially since it was Hari Raya Aidilfitri. Malaysia Hall was standing room only when he arrived for an informal dialogue, which was arranged at short notice.

Tun Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali, who was also present at Malaysia Hall, quipped smilingly after the question and answer session: "It looks like I still don't have my husband back yet!"

To a question on the leadership transition a month ago, Dr Mahathir described it as "so far, so good".

He advised the students to make a wise choice for their country when it came to the elections and reject those who want to "do a Taliban on us".

On his recent comments about the Jews, which was widely reported in the London newspapers, Dr Mahathir said he spoke the truth.

"Prove that it's not true and I will accept it," he said, adding that his criticism of Muslims had gone unnoticed but his comments on the Jews had led him to be branded "abominable".

He said he was not against the Jews but had merely pointed out what he had seen was wrong.

Picking up on the political tone, several students spoke of their hope for a Malaysia that was less divided along racial lines and where politics was based on ideology, not race.

Dr Mahathir agreed that the situation was not entirely satisfactory, noting that a Bangsa Malaysia could not emerge out of economic disparity among the races and heightened racial politics.

Economic disparity caused people to feel insecure about their interests, and racial politics forced political parties to be increasingly vocal in championing their own causes.

"These are all constraints in the development of a Bangsa Malaysia," he said.

He, however, felt that ideology-based politics could be equally divisive if the ideology became the ends, rather than the means.

"Malaysia has no ideology. If it has one at all, it is pragmatism," he said.

Of his life as Prime Minister, he said he was motivated by a love for the job and the results of his work, acknowledging that it was good to have had so much time at the helm.

"I had the opportunity to plan, implement and make corrections along the way," he said.

In defence of his "ambitious" projects, he said to imagine a Malaysia without a Penang Bridge, North-South Expressway, KL International Airport or Petronas Twin Towers, all necessary projects for the future. More importantly, Malaysia could afford to build them.

His job now, he said, was to explain Malaysia to the world. "It's a labour of love."