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PM: Umno now in position of strength

reports on "Umno General Assembly 2003" by Nuraina A. Samad; Sharif UMNO president and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is satisfied he is leaving behind a stronger, united party.

He said he was gratified to have been able to restore support for the party, which was apparent at its 54th general assembly.

Speaking at a Press conference at the end of the assembly, he said things in the party were now at their best.

He said Umno had regained its vitality because it had been able to explain issues that had cropped up during the 1999 general election. "The people then didn't understand why we did certain things.

"When I became the Prime Minister, I thought I would never have to do things that would anger the people but I was forced to do it.

"It was not my choice. What I did was all within the law but it was dismissed as being manipulative.

"So you cannot do anything right. You are damned if you do and damned if you don't. That is the problem we face."

The Prime Minister was also asked whether unity could be strengthened if Umno was to accept former leaders who had left the party.

"There are leaders who have rejoined the party, Tengku Razaleigh (Hamzah), my deputy (Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi) have reconciled. There is no problem with us."

To a question on re-admitting former Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, he said: "If the party wants to accept him after I leave, then I have no right to say no.

"But when you are in the party, you must fight for the party; but if you want to plot, take things for yourself, subvert people with bribes, I don't think that will result in good leadership."

On his plans after retirement, Dr Mahathir replied: "I have yet to resign, I still have four more months to go. There is still much time to think about what I am going to do."

He did not discount the possibility of writing a book about his experiences in the party and Government, especially as Prime Minister.

Asked by a reporter how he was able to control his emotions during the winding-up speech as many had expected him to "lose it", Dr Mahathir laughed.

"I am surprised at myself. I was afraid to make that speech in case I misbehaved again, but God is great and I managed to get through it without the famous breakdown that I had."

"Are you at peace with yourself now?" asked the reporter, to which he replied:

"I am always at peace. If not, I would not be able to manage."

He was asked to elaborate on his speeches to the assembly, which had focused on Pas and the wrongdoings it had committed, leading many to speculate that the general election was near.

Dr Mahathir said it was about Umno's heavy responsibility to return Muslims in the country to the right path. "This is not something we are doing for the election alone.

"It is a responsibility that needs to be shouldered by Umno because many Muslims have become mis-guided by Pas' brand of Islam."

He said Umno had a duty to ensure that practices, be they in the administration, policies or elsewhere, were consistent with Islam.

To a question on ways to defeat Pas in the general election, Dr Mahathir

said it could be achieved if everyone supported the party's candidates.

"If this is done, Umno will win. There should not be any dissatisfaction, people refusing to co-operate and operation centres being closed because of disagreement over the choice of candidates.

"We give priority to the party and all members must support the candidates selected."

Asked whether he was trying to make Malaysia more Islamic, Dr Mahathir said there was no need to do this as it was already a Muslim nation.

"We don't have to prove it, it is there. What you want us to do? Wear robes, turbans and go around looking like artificial Arabs, synthetic Arabs, virtual Arabs?

"We are Muslims. Sixty per cent of the people in this country are Muslims and the 40 per cent accepts the fact that it is a Muslim country. We don't have to prove it to anybody."

On the appointment of the next Deputy Prime Minister, with political pundits saying the list had been narrowed down to the party's two vice-presidents, Dr Mahathir said the matter would be the prerogative of the new Prime Minister.

"Whether two or 10 persons, the appointment is for Deputy Prime Minister, not deputy president of the party.

"This (deputy president) and also of Umno president will be decided by the party at its next assembly.

"In the meantime, all duties will be carried out in the capacity as acting president and deputy president."

Asked to describe "anxious" moments in his 22 years as party president and Prime Minister, Dr Mahathir said in politics, one had to go through the ups and downs.

"Like when there is a defection I feel sad, but these things happen in politics. Nothing is permanent. In politics, friends can turn enemies and vice-versa.

"That's my experience, which made me sad, then happy, then sad again ... something like the (ups and downs of the) stock market."

Asked what he planned to do after the assembly, Dr Mahathir said: "Rest, so tomorrow don't disturb melah."

To a question on what he would miss most from the party's general assemblies, Dr Mahathir said it was the chance to explain issues to the people.

"I realise many things we do, people don't understand and they need to be explained. The assemblies provide us with the opportunity to do that, to close ranks and to continue with the struggle."