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Full confidence nation will continue to prosper under new leadership

KUALA LUMPUR, Fri. - Giving their full endorsement of the country's economic policies under Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, delegates to the Umno 54th general assembly today expressed confidence the country will continue to grow and prosper under the leadership of his successor.

They said Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who is taking over the country's leadership after Dr Mahathir steps down in October, would continue with the policies which had proven successful.

One such example was the growth with equity programme, the back-bone of the New Economic Policy, which had managed to stimulate the economy and championed the interests of less fortunate groups.

From the implementation of such policies, Malaysia has emerged as a model country.

Debating a motion on economy, the delegates emphasised Abdullah needed the support of all not because he was chosen by the Prime Minister, but as a continuation of Dr Mahathir's legacy.

They wanted various programmes and schemes to be continued and improved, with special attention given to improving the lot of the Bumiputera.

Unanimous in their stance, the party members stressed the importance of Umno to continue playing the leading role in all fields, especially in bringing development to rural areas.

Taking a swipe at their arch-rival, Pas, delegates said the economy would be in ruins if the party was given the chance to manage it, a grim reminder to the electorate on the danger of giving their votes to the Opposition.

A Perlis delegate, praising Dr Mahathir for his sound economic vision, recounted how the Prime Minister had helped change the life-style and economic standing of people in rural areas.

"Some children now do not even know what a kerbau (buffalo) is. They have also not seen in their life a tenggala (a wooden contraption used to plough the land) or gerak (bicycle).

"More interesting, even the children of rubber tappers do not know the existence of mesin getah (rubber sheet rollers)."

All these changes, he said, were the result of Umno's struggle.

Today's proceedings started with five more speakers debating the motion of thanks on the presidential address.

They were Pahang Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Adnan Yaakob, Perak Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Tajol Rosli Ghazali, Johor Menteri Besar Datuk Ghani Othman, Federal Territory Umno chief Tengku Datuk Adnan Tengku Mansor and Umno Overseas Club representative Jumiyati Ismail.

It followed the motion on economy tabled by Wanita representative Raja Ropiaah Raja Abdullah and seconded by Kelantan representative and state Umno treasurer Datuk Dr Awang Adek Hussin.

On the political front, many delegates and observers felt Dr Mahathir could sleep and rest easy as his earlier fears of contests for top posts in the party next year - a worrying prospect as contests in Umno will translate into discord and disunity - had been addressed.

The Prime Minister yesterday acknowledged that an atmosphere intolerant of bickering was prevalent in the party now.

This was apparent after the succession issue in the party and Government - particularly the appointment of a deputy prime minister and election of

Umno deputy president - was discussed in the open, leading to pledges from the front-runners that they would not challenge the person chosen by Abdullah as his deputy.

A delegate noted that Dr Mahathir, shrewd as ever, had succeeded in extinguishing the intention of aspirants gunning for top posts in the party when the Prime Minister expressed concern that there would be infighting for the posts of deputy president and vice-presidents after his retirement.

But a division leader from Penang said contests for the vice-presidency could not be avoided because one of the three vice-president's slots is expected to be vacant.

(This is based on the assumption that one of the vice-presidents - Datuk Seri Najib Razak, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin and Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib - will be appointed Deputy Prime Minister and later nominated as party deputy president.)

A motion on religion and social issues will be tabled tomorrow, the last day of the assembly.

Dr Mahathir will also deliver his last winding-up, after which he officially closes the assembly.