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It's not my call any more, Dr M reminds aspiring candidates

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KUALA LUMPUR, Tues. - Umno president and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today told party members aspiring to contest in the next general election to abandon notions of using him to lobby for candidacy.

Addressing delegates ahead of the party's annual general meeting on Thursday, Dr Mahathir said he would not entertain anyone wanting his endorsement.

Delegates said the Prime Minister made it clear yet again that the choice of candidates would be squarely the call of his deputy, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who would assume the country's leadership in October.

A party member said the Prime Minister did not mince his words in driving home the message to the gathering of more than 2,000 division and branch leaders in Dewan Merdeka at the Putra World Trade Centre.

He said Dr Mahathir, in no uncertain terms, declared "please do not come begging and pleading to me" because the decision was not his to make.

Wanita Umno chief Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz said the Prime Minister emphasised that he did not want people coming to him to protest over the selection of candidates.

"Dr Mahathir advised members to accept decisions made by the party leadership and give their full support to ensure the selected candidates' victory."

Later at a Press conference, Dr Mahathir said he briefed delegates on the importance of leadership and the roles they had to play to ensure victory for the party in the general election.

He said he focused on that aspect as the divisional and branch leaders would spearhead the party's election machinery.

Asked to elaborate on his advice to the delegates, Dr Mahathir said:

"As leaders, they would have to ensure victory for the party and possess characteristics which could help achieve this."

Dr Mahathir said leaders should not place their own interests above the party's.

Among their immediate task, he said, was to ensure unity and avoid any power struggle.

"Good leadership means there will be no power struggle. If there is a power struggle, after it is over, they will close ranks and give support to whoever wins."

Asked what he would focus on in his presidential address this year, Dr Mahathir said: "I will say the same thing, repeat the whole thing. It is good to repeat because as I have pointed out before, people tend to forget.

"Do you remember what I told you 10 years ago? You don't remember, so I have to repeat."

The Prime Minister was also asked on the pledge by the party's vice-presidents not to challenge the person appointed by Abdullah as Deputy Prime Minister for the party's number two post.

"It is good if they say so but there are others who are not vice-presidents who might mount a challenge. In the party, we cannot be certain of this ... we cannot say there should be no contest at all.

"But I hope based on tradition, when a deputy president is elected, after that he will not be challenged, although this tradition has been broken by some people."

When pointed out the post of Umno deputy president would be vacant next year, hence aspirants were not "tied down" by the tradition, Dr Mahathir replied:

"Yes, before he is elected, there may be a contest. But after he is elected, the tradition is that you don't challenge."

On whether this meant a contest for the deputy president's post would be allowed next year, Dr Mahathir said:

"Well, if there is a contest but there are also certain norms that we follow. For example when Datuk Hussein (Tun Hussein Onn) was Prime Minister, he picked me as the Deputy Prime Minister but I was not the party's deputy president.

"However, when the party election was held, I was nominated to the post and won uncontested."

Pressed whether he was confident there would be no contest for the post, he expressed hope there would be none.

He reasoned it could create unnecessary problems especially if the candidate who won the post was not the person Abdullah had appointed as Deputy Prime Minister.

"Then people will say that a change is necessary since he has been elected deputy president, he should be made Deputy Prime Minister."

Asked what he hoped from this assembly, being his last, Dr Mahathir said this would not be any different from previous ones, except that it would be the last time he would officially open it.

To a suggestion that it would be a "very emotional assembly" because he would be retiring in October, Dr Mahathir quipped: "There was already a lot of emotion last year, now it is exhausted ... no more tears, all dried up."

On the worries expressed by some that he would step down at this assembly and not in October, Dr Mahathir dismissed it, saying he would stick to his promise and would not do anything which could damage his credibility.