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Muhyiddin: I won't challenge anyone picked by Abdullah

Shahrums Sayuthi; Sajahan Waheed

JOHOR BARU, Sun. - Umno vice-president Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin today gave an assurance that he would not challenge the person chosen by Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi to become his deputy.

He also proposed that the party deputy presidency, which by convention is held by the Deputy Prime Minister, should not be contested in the party polls next year.

Speaking to reporters during a break at the Johor Umno Convention 2003 today, Muhyiddin emphasised that Umno members should support the person chosen by Abdullah.

Muhyiddin said this when asked to comment on remarks by Prime Minister and Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in an interview with a Malay daily today that he was worried about a scramble for the deputy presidency after Abdullah took over from him.

"The Prime Minister should not be worried. I will abide by my stand. I will respect the decision made by Pak Lah (Abdullah) on this matter."

Muhyiddin said Dr Mahathir's concern was justifiable based on Umno's history.

"We should respect his view. If the president has already chosen from among us his deputy, I will support his decision, which he would have made after taking into account all aspects."

Muhyiddin said he was confident that Abdullah, after becoming Prime Minister, would use his wisdom and take into account the interests of the party and the Government in naming his deputy as it was his prerogative, "Pak Lah, who will lead the country, surely will give priority to stability because he has a lot of work to do to ensure the continuation of the excellent leadership of the current Prime Minister, who has managed to tackle major issues and strengthen the party," he added.

Muhyiddin said the party deputy presidency was an elected post as dictated by the democratic process of the party and was an important post because by tradition, the person who held the post would become the Deputy Prime Minister.

"I am of the opinion that the post (of deputy president) should not be contested for the good of the party so that Umno's stability and unity could be preserved.

"This does not mean we are rejecting the democratic process. What is important is that the Prime Minister, in choosing the person to hold this post, must have taken into account that the person could assist him politically and in the running of the Government.

"If there is a contest (for the deputy president's post), there may be a split within the party. Although in line with the democratic principle, there will be repercussions for the party.

"I am of the opinion that Umno should start a new tradition, that is, the person selected to be the Deputy Prime Minister should be spared and not challenged.

"Personally, I will not challenge the person chosen by Pak Lah to be the Deputy Prime Minister and (Umno) deputy president.

"It is appropriate that we honour the person chosen to assist the party president. Although this does not sound very democratic, there are many benefits to gain from it."

In Kuala Lumpur, other Umno leaders described Dr Mahathir as being sincere in his concern that the fight for the deputy and vice-presidents'

posts would lead to disunity.

They also pledged to ensure that the party unity would not be jeopardised and Umno's struggle would continue after Dr Mahathir stepped down in October.

Party vice-president Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib said Dr Mahathir was being open and honest in advising party members to avoid any situation that would weaken the party.

Wanita Umno secretary Datuk Faridah Abu Hassan said the "black incidents" in the party must not recur.

"We must try to avoid competition and it is best that the posts are filled through discussions and compromise. That is important as it is the duty of all party members to ensure that Umno is united and relevant."

Umno Youth deputy head Datuk Abdul Aziz Sheikh Fadzir said those aspiring to the deputy and vice-presidents' posts should listen to Dr Mahathir's advice.

"It is not the question of one contesting due to the demands of one's supporters or the grassroots. It is a question of how much we love Umno and want to ensure that the party is united."

Puteri Umno head Azalina Othman Said said there were talks among Umno circles of a possible contest although the party elections would only be held next year.

"Our priority should be the general election and not making preparations for party elections. What is the point of holding a top party post if we are not returned to power in the general election?"

Party executive secretary Tengku Datuk Adnan Tengku Mansor likened Dr Mahathir's statement to an advice from a father to his children.

"Umno members must not get involved in internal party problems. Our focus should be to fight the Opposition and we can only do this effectively if we are united."

Hulu Terengganu Umno division vice-head Rosol Wahid said Dr Mahathir's advice was a timely reminder to ensure there was no split in the party due to fights for posts.

"Umno has gone through intense competitions and it takes time to restore the party. We must not allow another intense fight to occur and it is the responsibility of all party members to ensure that we are united," said Rosol, who is the Ajil State Assemblyman.