

17/06/2003

## No challenges to party unity

DATUK Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is not worried about any challenge to Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad for the presidency of Umno because he does not think there will be any. Tan Sri Musa Hitam, a former deputy president of Umno whose name is invariably mentioned as a possible contender, agrees with the Umno president and has reiterated that he has no wish to contest.

What Dr Mahathir is concerned about is the possible tussle for the posts of deputy president and vice-presidents. Abdullah has said that the major Umno leaders have assured him that when he becomes prime minister, they will accept whoever he selects as his deputy. However, while it is the prerogative of the prime minister to choose his deputy, it is the delegates to the Umno general assembly who elect the deputy president. He must therefore choose wisely and adhere to an agreed succession process, as Dr Mahathir has always stressed and seems to have set.

In a recent newspaper interview, the Umno president said that his focus in this year's general assembly was to prepare the party for victory in the next general election. In this context, party unity is crucial. This will be put in jeopardy by the negative fall-out from the in-fighting that contests for top party posts tend to generate. Like other political parties, Umno has had its fair share of internal struggles. So virulent was the battle for the top two party posts in the late 1980s, that Umno split into two major factions, was declared an illegal organisation, and had to be reconstituted. This is why Dr Mahathir has every reason to be troubled with the onset of factionalism, money politics, character assassination and poison-pen letters within the party, where the losers refuse to support the winners after the results of party elections are declared.

Umno has recovered from the traumatic events of 1998, and is now more stable and stronger than it has been for a long time. Its members need to reduce politicking, and to devote less energy to gaining positions and more time and resources to strengthening the party. Umno leaders and the rank-and-file should do what needs to be done to avoid the intrigues and squabbles which could impede a smooth transition of power from Dr Mahathir to Abdullah.