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People of Sabah to decide (HL)

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KOTA KINABALU, Mon. - The people of Sabah will decide on the future of the system of rotation of the chief minister's post, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

The Prime Minister said the Barisan Nasional would listen to the people and act accordingly.

"We have to heed their feelings. If they are happy with the system we go ahead, but if they are not happy, we may have to change," Dr Mahathir said at a Press conference after opening the Parti Bersatu Sabah's 18th annual delegates conference at the Hongkod Koisaan in Penampang, near here.

Dr Mahathir said this after he was asked about the future of the system in light of the return of PBS to the BN.

Present were Chief Minister Datuk Musa Aman, BN secretary-general Tan Sri Mohamed Rahmat and BN component party leaders.

Dr Mahathir mooted the idea of rotating the post among the three major communities - Muslim Bumiputera, Chinese and the non-Muslim Bumiputera - during the campaign for the 1994 State election.

It was to give the leaders of each community an opportunity to lead the State for a two-year term, a practice implemented when the BN took over the the State Government in March 1994.

The system was slightly modified when Datuk Chong Kah Kiat was appointed chief minister in 2001, with the Muslim Bumiputera assuming the post alternately with the non-Muslim Bumiputera and Chinese.

Asked if he would like to see the system to be continued, Dr Mahathir, who is BN chairman, said it was not a question of whether he liked it but rather whether the people of Sabah liked it.

On whether the BN Government was considering introducing a law to prevent party hopping, Dr Mahathir said he would not know if the Government could have such a law.

"I don't know whether the Government can have a law of that sort but we hope there will not be any party hopping between BN parties," he said.

Dr Mahathir said preventing party hopping would be difficult, and all the leadership could do was to appeal to BN members not to do so.

On the need for the BN to win by a large majority in the next general election, Dr Mahathir said a big mandate from the people would ensure continuity.

Earlier in his speech, Dr Mahathir said differences in opinion among political parties had not led to unrest in Malaysia as the people were moderate in their views.

Referring to differences of opinion with the PBS in the past, he said in some countries, differences were so strong among parties that they caused unrest and in some cases, war and bloodshed.

"PBS is not an enemy. At times, we had different opinions. In politics, sometimes we become friends and at times we become enemies. Those who were enemies in the past could become friends again," he said.

PBS pulled out of the BN on the eve of the general election in 1990 and rejoined the coalition early last year.

Dr Mahathir said Malaysia was fortunate as there was peace and development despite the multi-racial character of the nation.

Dr Mahathir, who last opened the PBS annual delegates conference in 1987, was conferred the "Father of National Unity" title by the party. PBS president Datuk Seri Joseph Pairin Kitingan presented the award to Dr

Mahathir.

"We appreciate the role and contribution of Dr Mahathir in uniting the people. The vision of unity is also the vision of PBS. We want to see people from different races and religions living in peace and harmony," Pairin said.

On a report quoting Kelantan Menteri Besar Datuk Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat as saying that universities were producing criminals, Dr Mahathir told reporters there were people in Kelantan who were old and never went to university but had committed crimes.

"I saw this picture of a rapist coming from the village. He was wearing a white cap. He raped his grandchildren.

"He must be very old. I don't think he went to university and many of them are to be found in Kelantan."

Dr Mahathir said it was not the university that was at fault but Pas because it did not teach proper Islam.

"I don't think it is because of the university but it is because Pas does not teach proper Islam. They are teaching the opposite of Islam so that people would get confused," he said.