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Time to focus on polls, PM tells MCA

reports on "MCA Annual General Assembly 2003" by Zubaidah Abu Bakar; PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said the MCA should concentrate on the next general election now that the party has resolved its internal problems.

"I am very grateful to God that you have solved your problems before the general election.

"The focus now is on the general election," he added.

Dr Mahathir, who is the Barisan Nasional chairman, said he was impressed with the unique and wise actions the party leaders had taken in tackling the leadership crisis.

He said the resolution of the crisis had been smooth and likened it to pulling a thread out of flour, without spilling the flour.

He said this at the opening of the 50th MCA general assembly at the MCA headquarters in Kuala Lumpur yesterday.

Present were Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, BN component party leaders and MCA veterans, including life president Tan Sri Lee San Choon.

Dr Mahathir said although the peace formula had been positive, there was bound to be a fraction (of members) who remained dissatisfied.

However, he believed they would eventually subscribe to MCA unity.

"There are always a handful who are not satisfied and this is normal," he said, reminding members that the party does not exist for its leaders but the other way round.

"Let bygones be bygones as there is no point in holding a grudge."

Praising Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik and Datuk Seri Lim Ah Lek for stepping down as MCA president and deputy president respectively for the sake of party unity, Dr Mahathir described their action as a noble sacrifice.

Dr Ling and Lim, who were present at the opening, resigned from their posts on May 23 to end the three-year leadership crisis in the party.

Their resignations had paved the way for Datuk Seri Ong Ka Ting to take over as president and Datuk Chan Kong Choy as deputy president. Dr Ling was subsequently appointed as life president of the party.

Dr Mahathir also expressed his confidence in the ability of Ong, who is Housing and Local Government Minister, and Chan, who has replaced Dr Ling as Transport Minister, to lead the MCA.

"I see that the new leaders of MCA are co-operating well... I can also see close communication between Ong and Chan," he said.

Dr Mahathir said it was important for MCA to remain united as a BN component representing the Chinese and to co-operate with other component parties to face the general election.

He urged the MCA to work with other parties, especially Gerakan which he described as MCA's younger brother.

"Of course, the elder brother loves his younger brother, but the younger brother should also not create problems," he said.

At a Press conference later, Dr Mahathir clarified that the two Chinese-based parties were not facing problems and his remarks earlier on the two parties were meant as a joke.

Dr Mahathir, who is the Umno president, had also described MCA and Umno as close friends and thus, what happened in MCA would affect Umno and vice-versa.

"When MCA is sick, Umno becomes ill and Barisan Nasional gets a

headache... when Umno is sick, MCA falls ill and we all get headaches."

He also expressed Umno's gratitude to MCA for helping Umno Baru return to BN when Umno was declared illegal in 1988.

Dr Ling, who then became the BN chairman, accepted Umno Baru into BN's fold and this showed the close co-operation between the two parties.

Dr Mahathir also said under the BN spirit of co-operation, BN would determine its candidates.

Once the decisions were made, the question of which party the candidates were representing and whether the candidates were Malays, Chinese, Indians or Kadazan would not arise as they are representing the BN.

The Prime Minister also refuted speculations that the next general election would be held before his retirement in October.

"I don't have the time. I have to travel all over the world before I step down. So many countries have invited me," he said.

Dr Mahathir said because of his tight schedule, he had delegated to Abdullah the task of holding discussions among the BN component parties on the 25 newly-created parliamentary seats.