

Mahathir: Muhyiddin fit to lead Bersatu, but the nation...

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EXCLUSIVE Just two weeks ago, former Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad told a crowd in London that Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (Bersatu) president Muhyiddin Yassin was the most likely choice to become the next prime minister, if the opposition wins the next general election.

However, in an exclusive interview with *Malaysiakini* at his office in Putrajaya last Wednesday, Mahathir appeared to have changed his tone, declining to fully commit to Muhyiddin as the prime minister, when asked if Muhyiddin was fit to lead.

"I think at the moment, with support, I think he can lead," Mahathir said, and after a quick but noticeable pause, added "the party".

"Whether he can lead the government is another matter," he continued.

The pause stood out in the interview, for, despite his advanced age, the 91-year-old was sharp and quick to answer almost all questions thrown at him, without hesitating.

As the conversation progressed, this hesitation turned into a denial when asked if Muhyiddin was his choice for the head of government.

This was unlike his words at the London lecture, when he said Muhyiddin Yassin is the [top pick for prime minister](#) if the opposition wins.

"No. I think the choice for prime minister (if the opposition wins), when the parties meet (after winning the election, it) depends on the members.

"I can't say so and so should be prime minister," he said in the interview held last week.

Mahathir also said, when speaking about future leaders, that a person's ability to lead can only be judged once they are in power, adding that he had "chosen the wrong leader so many times".

Observers had questioned whether Muhyiddin, a former deputy prime minister, was capable of leading the country, noting his lack of meaningful action after Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak axed him from the cabinet.

The pronouncement two weeks ago also put Mahathir and Muhyiddin at odds with Pakatan Harapan, which remains committed to jailed PKR de facto leader Anwar Ibrahim as their man in Putra Perdana.

'Up to the members to determine'

Mahathir also said that Bersatu can survive without him and with Muhyiddin at the helm, but was quick to note that it won't always stay that way.

"It doesn't mean he (Muhyiddin) is a permanent president or anything like that. We will have elections and it is up to the members to determine whether he is fit to continue or not to continue."

In the following excerpt from *Malaysiakini's* exclusive interview, the country's longest serving prime minister also addresses allegations that he is trying to return to power; speaks further on the country's future leadership; and on whether Umno can be saved.

The interview has been edited for language and brevity.

Why is there a chairperson and a president in Bersatu?

We don't want to concentrate power in only one person. We find that if there is abuse of power, the (supreme) council is not capable of curbing the abuses.

So its better to have another body chaired by the chairperson, who will balance the authority of the president.

Some have accused you of trying to keep Muhyiddin on a leash by becoming chairperson?

Well that is normal for people to say. But I'm too old to keep anybody on a leash. But I do believe two heads are better than one.

Some say you might become minister mentor, like the late Lee Kuan Yew.

I have no ambition to become a minister, (neither) senior minister nor minister mentor or whatever.

Annuar Musa said if Mukhriz wants to be prime minister he can come back to Umno.

(Chuckles) I think Umno isn't going to produce prime ministers forever.

Besides Muhyiddin, who do you see as capable of leading the country?

Well there are many other people who have not been allowed to join Umno in particular. Because Umno leaders are afraid of anyone better than them joining the party and maybe ousting them.

Umno leaders have become less and less capable because they only allow people less capable than themselves to join the party, and when they die, the party is led by poorer leaders, and when that person dies, the quality of the leader goes down further.

Can you name anyone specifically that you see can become a leader of the country?

Well I can't say specifically, but we have a lot of people who are interested in joining Umno, for example, (but) who have been prevented from joining Umno.

In fact, Mukhriz was not allowed to join Umno. So I do hope that once we form Bersatu, these people will join us because we don't have any restrictions on capabilities.

Do you see anyone among the youth that can become leaders?

I won't name them but I think they are much better educated than the current leaders.

When the youth comes to power, should they refer to the older generation?

The older generation will fade away. They will die. There are not many survivors. Those who are my age, how many of them are there? They will become incapacitated or they die.

Your son Mukhriz proposed to limit a prime minister's stay in office to two terms. Do you support this?

This is the trend all over the world. Some limit to one term, some limit to two terms.

But what is important is that a prime minister must be given time to think, to understand his work, to formulate policies and to implement policies.

In my case, I had 22 years and therefore I had a lot of time to do and oversee what has been done. But I think if a person is there for too long, he may abuse his power.

In my case, I decided myself to step down, without pressure from others.

Don't you think this proposal is ironic, given that you are the longest serving prime minister in Malaysia?

I think Mukhriz is basing it on my successes. During my time, I didn't hear anyone tell me to step down, I had to step down on my own.

But now people want the prime minister to step down, if possible before one term is over. It is because of (the prime minister's) performance.

If corrupt leaders leave Umno can it be saved?

It is beyond saving. People hate it now.

Would you consider coming back to save Umno if the leaders are gone?

No I don't think so, I have passed that stage already.

Do you have any regrets leaving Umno?

I have regrets, because this was my party. I was a member from 1946. I was even the president of the party. It was not easy for me to decide to leave the party.

But it has now become a different party, not the Umno that was originally founded by the founding fathers.

Can you sympathise with former Prime ministers Tunku Abdul Rahman and Hussein Onn, who left the party?

They didn't actually leave the party. They were members of the party. But when I formed Umno Baru (after Umno was declared illegal in 1988), they didn't rejoin, that's all.

So can you sympathise with their decision not to rejoin Umno then?

I think the situation is not the same. I did not steal money; I did not do anything that was wrong.

But they had every right not to support me directly, or to be with other parties as well.

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