

Dr M: Najib more qualified than Pak Lah
Malaysiakini.com
May 9, 2007
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Between Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and Najib Abdul Razak, former premier Dr Mahathir Mohamad said Najib can do a better job as prime minister.

However, Mahathir opted to pick Abdullah for the job because of his seniority over Najib.

"If it is a comparison between him and Najib, I would say that he (Abdullah) was less qualified," said Mahathir.

He underscored the fact that Najib, now Prime Minister Abdullah's deputy, had won the highest number of votes in the 2000 Umno party elections for the three vice-president posts. "But I also thought that he (Najib) was, maybe, a little bit young so he should give an older person a chance. That was why I decided on Abdullah," he said in a recent interview with malaysiakini at his Perdana Leadership Foundation office in Putrajaya.

Reiterating that he had expected Abdullah, 67, to make way for Najib, 53, after serving one-term as premier, Mahathir also disclosed that he had written to his handpicked successor before stepping down three years ago to ensure Najib was picked as the new deputy.

"Of course, he took a long time to make that decision, and at one time, I thought that he was not going to," he said.

While this was partly due to his debt of gratitude to Najib's father - second premier Tun Abdul Razak Hussain - Mahathir, 81, also said he believed Najib would have stayed the course on the policies he had laid out during his two decades in power.

"I wouldn't say, for example, that Najib would drop the bridge. He was talking about building the bridge to the very last moment," he said of the abandoned half-bridge to Singapore, a project conceived during his own tenure.

Abdullah, on the other hand, has gone "completely in the opposite direction", he added bitterly.

According to Mahathir, Najib's only fault is his insecurity over his position.

"I think if Najib is not so afraid of losing his position if he displeases the prime minister, he would make a good prime minister."

Mahathir's scathing remarks are the latest in a year-long running battle with Abdullah over allegations of corruption and his running of the country.

From the sluggish state of the economy to charges that Abdullah's family members were cashing in on his position, Mahathir exploited every opportunity to take jabs at Abdullah.

Willing to swear on the Quran

He denied, however, that the charges of corruption and nepotism that he has leveled against

Abdullah was a case of the pot calling the kettle black.

"Certainly not during my time, I never gave my children any special boosts or anything like that, but they did business on their own, largely, not with the government agencies," he said.

Mahathir, who is advisor to Petronas, said he was willing to publicly swear that he had never uttered even "one word" in favour of his son Mokhzani in his business dealings with the state oil company.

"And if he (Abdullah) requires that I go into a mosque and hold the Quran and swear that I never advised Petronas to give anything to Mokhzani, I'm prepared to do so," he said.

Mokhzani owns oil-and-gas engineering firm Kencana Petroleum Bhd (KPB). Half of Kencana's RM437 million earnings in 2006 is reported to have come from business with Petronas and Petronas-linked firms.

"I find that although I am advisor to Petronas, I have never been able to influence Petronas in any way. In fact, I know very little about Petronas," he said.

In the one-hour interview - his third with malaysiakini - Mahathir answered some of the key allegations made against him during his 22 years at the country's helm.

Unlike the previous two interviews, this is the first time that Mahathir accepted to meet with malaysiakini without any pre-conditions.

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