

'Pop star' Dr M's first gig in Bukit Gantang
Malaysiakini.com
April 6, 2008

Former premier Dr Mahathir Mohamad has made a comeback-of-sorts to politics, with an appearance in Bukit Gantang, Perak, this morning.

Mahathir, who has just submitted his application to rejoin Umno two days ago, arrived in Simpang at 10am to speak at a cultural event.

A crowd of about 2,000 greeted him with cheers, shouting "Hidup Tun" and "Hidup Mahathir". Many tried to shake his hand and to get a photograph with him.

It took Mahathir about 10 minutes to cut through the crowd and reach the stage.

Among the Umno leaders at the event are deputy president Muhyiddin Yassin and vice-president Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, as well as BN-appointed Perak menteri besar Zambry Abd Kadir and Bukit Gantang candidate Ismail Saffian.

Mahathir began by thanking the crowd for their welcome, saying it felt like he is already back in Umno. Shouts of "Hidup Tun" greeted his remark.

His 37-minute speech traced the reasons for stability and harmony in Malaysia's multi-racial society and the nation's progress, attributing this to BN's power-sharing formula and consensus in decision-making.

"I hope that we can remind ourselves of our history. We have been independent for more than 50 years and throughout the various races have been cooperating and we have managed to develop this country into the most developed country among other developing nations.

"There are foreigners who come here and land at the Kuala Lumpur International Airport and they would say we are not a third world country but a fully developed one," he said.

However, Mahathir said the rural areas have yet to be fully developed and he reminded the people that much remains to be done.

And for this to be achieved, there must first be a peaceful and racially-harmonious country, which only a strong government under BN leadership could ensure.

Mahathir then said the previous BN government, albeit not mentioning his name, under the weak leadership of former Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi had performed disappointingly.

"When the people's voices were not heard, they will express their grouses openly (and this can be reflected) in last year's general elections in March where the most loyal and staunchest of BN supporters had sent a clear message to BN (by voting for the opposition)," he said.

Abdullah a 'weak leader'

Mahathir however said the transition of power plan laid out by Abdullah that saw the rise of his favoured choice for the country's top post, Najib Abdul Razak, as the new prime minister will change the situation.

The former premier, who played an arguably pivotal role in ousting Abdullah, has been very critical of the latter's leadership and often described his handpicked successor as a weak and ineffective leader.

A cheerful Mahathir, 84, at this point acknowledged that he has been a "thorn in the flesh of the government...the previous one of course".

"I left the party (because I was disappointed with Abdullah) and it was a very difficult decision for me as I have been with Umno ever since it was formed in 1946, meaning for more than 60 years I have been with it. But my mouth can sometimes be a bit... rough.

"During the tenure of Tunku Abdul Rahman, I was also critical of him, and he threw me out of Umno... poor Dr Mahathir," he said, drawing laughter from the crowd.

"(But recently) I was not expelled but chose to quit the party voluntarily. That was how bad the situation was but now I am glad (that the transition plan) has taken place," Mahathir said, and added that he had handed over his application form immediately after witnessing Najib ascend as prime minister.

"In the past, it was his father (former Umno president and prime minister Abdul Razak) that took in my application form to join the party. Now, it is his son. I hope I don't have to resubmit it again to his grandchild," he said, drawing more laughter.

Political crisis facing the country

He added that under Najib, the government will be able to perform effectively and heal the country which is facing one of its greatest political crisis amidst the worst global economic meltdown since World War Two.

Mahathir also explained his presence at the recently-concluded Umno general assembly, saying it was due to Muhyiddin's election as deputy president and that he wanted to hear what Najib had to say in his winding-up speech as new Umno president at the party's congress last week.

"Najib said something interesting. He said that he does not disagree with various views expressed by Umno leaders that the party has to control the government.

"But he reminded them that it was important for the government to have the support of the people," he said, and added that Najib's speech reflects the kind of true democratic government that the new premier would form.

Throughout his off-the-cuff speech, he injected humour as he worked the crowd, laughingly responding to their remarks, taking digs against the opposition, especially protege-turn-nemesis Anwar Ibrahim, and supporting Ismail as the "local lad" who would be able to represent them.

"I'm confident we will not pawn our future to someone who is not responsible," Mahathir said of Anwar.

"He is a person (whose career) I helped elevate but he could not wait, he tried to topple me," Mahathir said. "You know who I am talking about."

Mahathir, who ended his speech at 11.40am, received a standing ovation from those present.

RTM1 telecast the event 'live' - a far cry from Mahathir's post-premiership days, when he complained that the mainstream media had blacked out his often-critical views.

Asked to comment about Mahathir's speech today, Muhyiddin said: "Tun is like a pop star! The good response when he arrived shows that people are back supporting BN.

"People are waiting to listen to his speech because it has been a long time since we have heard him speak."

Ahmad Zahid said he hopes the enthusiasm will translate to votes in the by-election to be conducted tomorrow.

Copyright © 1999-2007 Mkini Dotcom Sdn. Bhd.
Source : <http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/101746>