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Call for reforms, says Dr M

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PETALING JAYA: Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad yesterday urged Umno members to openly demand for reforms in the party, including asking Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi to resign.

The former prime minister said the recent general election, in which Barisan Nasional was denied two-thirds majority in parliament for the first time since 1969, exposed "severe weaknesses" and lack of confidence in the party leadership.

He called on party members to demand for an extraordinary general meeting and amend the party constitution on the election process which requires that candidates vying for key positions must obtain a minimum number of nominations before they are allowed to contest.

Currently, a challenger for the presidency has to be endorsed by 30 per cent of the party's 191 divisions, a requirement he himself had introduced 20 years ago during his tenure as party president.

"Yes, to be fair, I was the one who introduced this rule, but at that time, the divisions were not suppressed by the leadership," Dr Mahathir claimed.

Dr Mahathir said although history showed that Umno was never without its share of crisis, losing five states to the opposition was unprecedented and "totally unacceptable".

"The fact that Umno members were voting for the opposition shows how bad the situation is now in the party," the former Umno president said at a forum organised by the administrators of the Kelab Maya Umno website.

About 2,000 people, including several former Umno leaders, such as former secretary-general Tan Sri Sabbaruddin Chik, former supreme council members Datuk Ibrahim Saad and Datuk Khalid Yunus attended the forum at a hotel here.

Claiming that the current state of affairs beleaguering



Datuk Seri Dr Khir Toyo (left), Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad (third from right) and Datuk Mukhriz Mahathir (right) at a forum organised by the administrators of the Kelab Maya Umno website at a hotel here yesterday.

Umno and Barisan Nasional should be blamed entirely on Abdullah, who is also Umno president, Dr Mahathir called on the prime minister to do the honourable thing and "step down".

Dr Mahathir claimed Abdullah, whom at one stage he called "Sultan Abdullah Shah", had lost touch with what was happening on the ground because he was surrounded by "yes men" who were afraid to speak up for fear of repercussions.

Dr Mahathir claimed that many important decisions were left by Abdullah to his "aides", including the endorsement of Barisan Nasional's list of candidates for the recent elections.

"I've been informed that the list submitted by the state BN chiefs had to first go through the room next door. Only after that would the state BN leaders be allowed an audience with 'Sultan Abdullah Shah'," he said in a cynical reference to the prime minister.

Until and unless there were those brave enough to step up and demand changes, Dr Ma-

hathir said Umno would continue to weaken.

The party will eventually become irrelevant, more so if the opposition-held state governments do a good job and keep the people happy.

During the question-and-answer session, Dr Mahathir was asked whether he felt deputy Umno president Datuk Seri Najib Razak should take over as president, to which he said the position should be open to anyone capable enough, including Najib. Gua Musang MP Tengku Razalesgh Hamzah and vice-president Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin.

Panelists, comprising supreme council member Datuk Dr Mohamad Khir Toyo, Johor Umno information chief and Batu Pahat MP Datuk Dr Puad Zarkashi and Umno Youth exco member Datuk Mukhriz Mahathir were each given 15 minutes to speak.

Dr Khir acknowledged that reform within Umno was necessary, but did not support a change in leadership.

"We have to be objective and not be too emotional. Even if we had a change in leader-

ship, the same thing would happen. The Malays, Chinese and Indians were unhappy with how the New Economic Policy had not been effective."

During the question-and-answer session which followed, Umno Selangor members fired questions at him, accusing him of not performing well when he was menteri besar.

At a press conference later, Mukhriz reiterated his stand that urgent reforms were needed within Umno.

"Reform cannot wait, it must happen now so that before anything big happens, Umno can deliver results which are in the interest of the voters."

"There must first be change in the top leadership, perhaps a new supreme council, then reform will follow," he added.

Mukhriz had called for Abdullah to step down as party president in his speech, saying that Abdullah should accept responsibility for the bad showing in the polls.

When asked who he would prefer as president, Mukhriz said: "I'm inclined towards Najib (deputy president Datuk Seri Mohd Najib Razak)," but

did not elaborate further.

When asked whether he would contest for the position of Umno Youth chief, Mukhriz said he had not decided.

"If (Youth chief) Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein decides to contest for a higher position, then I will contest. But if Hishammuddin decides to remain in his present position, then I won't challenge him."

Dr Khir, who had faced criticisms during the forum, was not spared his share of difficult questions from reporters.

He acknowledged that change was needed but was evasive when asked whether he supported the call for Abdullah's resignation.

"Yes, we need reform within Umno, we need to study the results of the election and make sure they are not repeated."

When asked whether he would be bringing up members' concerns to the supreme council, Dr Khir said he would.

However when asked if he would also be proposing a solution, he said a proposal was not necessary as no conclusion had been reached at the forum.