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Leaders who don't have support should resign, says Mahathir

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KUALA LUMPUR: Leaders who no longer have the support of the people should step down, said former prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad (pix)

"If I were the prime minister today, I would resign. When I resigned, I did so on my own will, no one asked me to," he said when asked what would he do if he was the prime minister today.

"A leader should always look behind him (to see) if he does have supporters. If he does not find there are people behind him, he should make it easy for the country and step down," said Mahathir, the country's longest-serving prime minister who retired in 2003.

He was speaking at a forum entitled "The Malaysian Dilemma: The Good Doctor's Diagnosis and Prescription" here yesterday.

The talk was hosted by the Center for a Better Tomorrow, a non-governmental organisation.

Mahathir said that a leader should always remember his supporters and ensure that he fulfils their requests and wishes.

He expressed his disappointment over certain issues such as the existence of iMalaysia Development Bhd (iMDB).

"We should not have iMDB at all; how can it be national wealth if you borrow money? If you borrowed money from the chettiers (money-lenders), would you consider yourself rich? No! Because that is a loan!" he said.

When asked about Malaysian tycoon Ananda Krishnan coming to iMDB's aid by loaning money, Mahathir said that changed little; only instead of owing the banks now, it is Ananda.

"The whole thing is now a controversy and berserabut (very messy)! They should come clean and have an independent audit done. All governmental bodies should have independent audits done," he said.

"I didn't do this (independent audits) when I was the prime minister because I was not criticised as much!" he quipped.

Though Mahathir hinted that the present leader should step down, he said he did not know who should replace him.

"I don't know who would be the next successor, but not me, for sure. I'm already old," said the 90-year-old politician, who is still sharp and witty.

Though he had always chosen his successors, he confesses that he had often made bad choices.

When asked about US being critical about the imprisonment of his one-time deputy Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, Mahathir said for a country that has laws to imprison people without even a trial, it should not interfere in this (Anwar's case).

"Anwar is the American candidate for Malaysia. They (US) should mind their own



country and not interfere in other people's country. And if Anwar's daughter does contest in Permatang Pau, well, it is a family party, so must be replaced by a family member," he said sarcastically.

Although he said he has been called many things – a dictator and even an extremist – he maintains that he is a moderate and called on other moderates to speak up.

"In the (midst of the) rising voices of extremists in the country, the moderates should start speaking up. Or else people will not hear them. Recently, we had a group of 25 moderates standing up, with so many things being said to be Islamic. Some of it has nothing to do with being Islamic."

"Recently, there were calls forbidding Muslims from wishing Merry Christmas. Then they should also stop the Chinese from saying Selamat Hari Raya, this would make them (the Chinese Muslim!)"

Mahathir maintained that he had the support of Malaysians during the 1999 general election despite the imprisonment of Anwar in 1998 and the "black eye" incident (when the latter was assaulted while in police custody).

The Anwar incident cost him the loss of 300,000 Malay voters, but the support of the other races allowed him to gain a two-thirds majority, he said.

On his support for Perkasa, which has often been described as an extremist group, Mahathir said he supports the NGO when it stood up for Malay rights as Umno has not been doing so. "I will not support them if they do other extremist things!"

Mahathir also said the New Economic Policy (NEP) has been a success and should be continued for a while more; it should eventually phase out slowly.

"If the NEP was successful, why the need to continue, some people ask. While we have managed to reduce the disparity among the races, the Malays are still not able to compete with the other races; they still need some time.

"But the NEP must be phased out slowly and it is being done slowly. Some of the measures implemented in the past are no more in existence. It's necessary to phase it out," he said.

He also said the NEP is not a symbol of power or status. "The NEP is a 'tongkat'. It is a crutch often used by the old and decrepit. That's the reason I don't use a tongkat!" he said.