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'UMNO DEFECTORS CAN BRING IN MORE VOTES'

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'They should not be condemned for the wrongdoings of party leaders'

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UMNO members who have defected from the party have been absolved of the "sins" of their leaders.

Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who is Pakatan Harapan (PH) and Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (Bersatu) chairman, said the Umno members should not be condemned for their leaders' past transgressions, adding that many of them were "mere followers" and not leaders involved in formulating policies for the party.

Umno members, he said, also realised the wrongdoings of their leaders, particularly former Umno president Datuk Seri Najib Razak.

Dr Mahathir was responding to concerns over the Umno defectors joining Pakatan Harapan, particularly Bersatu.

"These people (who are accepted into Bersatu), they are followers. We are not keen to take (in) the leaders," he said.

Dr Mahathir, in vouching for some of them, said these members did not take part in formulating Umno's policies.

"They were ordinary members. They were chosen to become candidates (in the 14th General Elec-

tion) and they won. Now, (after seeing) the accusations levelled against Najib, (they feel that) Umno is no longer the party that it was.

"He (Najib) is no longer struggling for the principles on which Umno was founded," Dr Mahathir said in an interview with media editors on Tuesday.

On the mileage Bersatu stood to gain from Umno lawmakers joining Bersatu, Dr Mahathir said the group could strengthen Bersatu in rural areas.

H said it would also bring in the support needed to rake in substantial Malay votes.

His comments came on the heels of criticisms, particularly from DAP leaders who alleged that the prime minister was taking a shortcut to beef up Bersatu's numbers in Parliament.

Dr Mahathir said the entry, on the contrary, would strengthen PH as well.

"As you know, in the last election, quite a lot of Malays supported Umno. The party is still popular in the eyes of Malays.

"Those Malays must be brought out, because if those Malays support Bersatu, then Bersatu and PH will become strong," he said.

On whether PH members had voiced their concerns over the crossovers, Dr Mahathir said he had assured them that Bersatu would not be taken over by Umno

and that stringent checks would be carried out on the new members.

"Yes, they're concerned. We're concerned, too. We do not want to give the impression that Umno is taking over Bersatu or other parties in PH. We are serious about vetting these people.

"I think in the villages, (the ex-Umno members) are influential. If we reject them, then we may be rejecting voters."



Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad

Political observers said the acceptance of ex-Umno representatives into Bersatu would act as a link between Malays and the government.

Senior lecturer at the Political and Public Policy Faculty, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Dr Mazlan Ali, said PH needed the support of Malays, especially in the rural areas, because the combined power of

the political parties in PH was not balanced.

"After GE14, we witnessed that the strength of PH was concentrated only in urban and suburban areas.

"Hence, the entry of former Umno MPs can strengthen Bersatu and PH.

Professor Dr Mohd Azizuddin Mohd Sani, from Universiti Malaya's Law, Government and International Studies College, said the move was a strategy to attract and garner the support of Malays.