

Power transition after Apec summit

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Dr M reiterates that he will pass the baton to Anwar as promised

KUALA LUMPUR: Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, the world's oldest prime minister, has promised to hand over power to anointed successor Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim in spite of new sexual assault allegations against him.

Dr Mahathir, 94, said he would not hand over before a summit of Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec) countries that Malaysia is to host in November 2020, but could be ready after that.

"I made a promise to hand over and I will, accepting that I thought that a change immediately before the Apec summit would be disruptive.

"As far as I'm concerned, I'm stepping down and I'm handing the baton to him (Anwar). If people don't want him, that is their business, but I will do my part of the promise ... irrespective of whatever allegation. I made my promise, I keep my promise," he said in an interview with Reuters.

Asked if a handover could come in December 2020, Dr Mahathir said: "We'll look at that when the time comes."

The turbulent relationship between the two men – allies turned fierce rivals who later reunited to win power – has shaped politics in Malaysia for decades.

Dr Mahathir was unexpectedly elected in 2018 as the head of a coalition government whose largest party is led by Anwar, 72, who was jailed twice on separate counts of sodomy and for corruption – charges he says were politically motivated.

Last week, Anwar denied fresh



Cutting a deal: Dr Mahathir also hopes for an out-of-court settlement with Goldman Sachs soon over the 1MDB scandal. – Reuters

allegations by a former aide that he had tried to force him into having sex – describing the accusations as "politics at its worst".

It is Dr Mahathir's second stint as Malaysia's premier, a post he previously held for 22 years from 1981 to 2003. Anwar was his deputy from 1993 to 1998, when the two fell out. Anwar was jailed the following year.

Although Dr Mahathir promised to hand over power to Anwar during the 2018 general election campaign, doubts grew over his intentions when he later said he needed more time to steer the heavily-indebted country out of its troubles first.

Dr Mahathir said he hoped for an out-of-court settlement with Gold-

man Sachs soon over the 1MDB scandal that sent Malaysia's debt soaring.

He also raised the possibility of selling stakes in Petronas to oil and gas-rich provinces.

As well as planning to be the first leader in the world to host the Apec summit twice, Dr Mahathir has been pushing to cement his legacy as a leader in the Muslim world.

A summit in Kuala Lumpur next week would bring leaders from Iran, Pakistan, Turkey and other Muslim countries, officials said.

Dr Mahathir said the meeting would look into situations where Muslims were being oppressed.

That would include allegations of rights abuses against Uighur Muslims in China's Xinjiang region,

while adding that prospects for action by the Muslim world were limited.

"The Muslim world cannot challenge anybody. We are very weak. Anybody can manipulate us, they can even make us fight each other. That's how we are," he said.

He has not spared Myanmar from criticism over treatment of Rohingya Muslims after more than 700,000 were driven into Bangladesh by a military crackdown in 2017.

With Myanmar leader Aung San Suu Kyi set to defend Myanmar against accusations at the World Court in The Hague this week, Dr Mahathir said he hoped that abuses would be recognised and accepted.

"We hope that they will be able to explain and accept the fact that there has been genocide carried out," he said.

On 1MDB, Dr Mahathir said he is hopeful of reaching an out-of-court settlement with Goldman Sachs over the scandal soon, but that compensation of "one point something billion" dollars offered by the bank was too small.

The government has charged Goldman and 17 current and former directors of its units for allegedly misleading investors over bond sales totalling US\$6.5bil (RM27bil) that the US bank helped raise for the sovereign wealth fund.

Dr Mahathir said the government has demanded US\$7.5bil (RM31bil) from Goldman and negotiations were ongoing.

"We would like to avoid having to go to the courts, but if they come up with a reasonable sum, I think we

will agree," he said.

"But at the moment, their offer is too small. We're continuing to talk with them to explain why they should pay what we demand. Of course, it's not the full amount, that they may be able to bring down, but we think that we can reach some agreement at a later stage."

A spokesman for Goldman declined to comment.

Dr Mahathir said he hoped an agreement with Goldman would be reached "soon".

"Yes, I want to achieve a settlement. We are progressing, if we fail then we'll go to the courts," he said.

"We cannot preempt by going to the courts."

Goldman said in October it was in discussions with authorities on a possible resolution of investigations relating to 1MDB.

Dr Mahathir also said that Malaysia would not agree to a settlement with fugitive financier Jho Low, accused of playing a central role in the scandal.

Low has consistently denied wrongdoing and says he does not expect a fair trial in Malaysia as long as Dr Mahathir is in power.

"We think he is very guilty. We have proof of that," Dr Mahathir said of Low.

"We want to settle it according to the law."

Dr Mahathir said Malaysian authorities have no contact with Low or his representatives and did not know where he is.

The US Justice Department said last month it struck a deal to recover US\$1bil (RM4bil) in funds allegedly looted from 1MDB from Low.