One-on-one meeting held under cloak of secrecy

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KUALA LUMPUR: The protracted differences between Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad have only served to benefit their political opponents.

Abdullah conveyed this point in his one-on-one meeting with his predecessor which took place for about two hours at his official residence in Putrajaya yesterday.

Dr Mahathir said at a Press conference after the highly-anticipated meeting that Abdullah spoke about how both of them had lost their popularity as a result of the spat.

Dr Mahathir's sons Datuk Mukhriz and Datuk Mokhzani were also present at the Press conference at his house in Seri Kembangan, near here.

"He told me that since I have been criticising I have become very unpopular ... that he too has lost popularity because of my criticisms and that the people that have benefited are (Datuk Seri) Anwar Ibrahim and (Datuk) Nik (Abdul) Aziz (Nik Mat) who have become more popular.

"There wasn't much about anything else," he said.

Dr Mahathir said while he had conveyed to Abdullah his grouses, he would "wait and see if there were changes".

The former prime minister said he was satisfied that he had been able to say his piece directly to Abdullah, adding that he made it clear that he wanted to be free in making his criticisms.

The meeting, which became a talking point when it was first mentioned recently, was held under a cloak of secrecy and got nearly everyone guessing yesterday about the turn of events and the outcome.

Journalists particularly were on an endless stakeout at the possible venues but yet most of them missed it when Dr Mahathir entered the Prime Minister's official residence through a private entrance.

Security guards said Dr Mahathir entered Seri Perdana at 3pm and left at 5.07pm.

He left in a heavily-tinted black Mercedes bearing the registration number JCJ 3 and on his way out, noticed reporters waiting and smiled.

Dr Mahathir, who was seated up front, then gestured to the person driving to stop the car. The car stopped for 10 seconds to allow photographers to take their shots.

The meeting was an initiative of Mubarak, the association of former elected representatives, who sought to see an end to the squabble between the two personalities.

Answering questions later, Dr Mahathir said Abdullah in reacting to the issue of the involvement of his son Kamaluddin and son-in-law Khairy Jamaluddin, denied the allegations Dr Mahathir had made against them.

"He said the accusation that they ring up people and all that is not true ... but he wants to find out from them whether they did or not."

At the meeting, Dr Mahathir also pointed out to Abdullah that it was not right to postpone the party elections even though he himself had done this before.

"The general election is not anytime soon, hence, there was no reason for the election of Umno's office bearers to be delayed."

Dr Mahathir said he also expressed his displeasure at being prevented from speaking to Umno members.

He said Abdullah rebuffed his allegation that the country was a police state whereby each time he was invited to speak, the police would be called to question and instil fear in his audience.

The issue of the cancelled bridge project which was to replace the Causeway, he said, was also raised although Abdullah offered no comments.

Dr Mahathir said he also raised the issues of Proton, the AP and (International Trade and Industry Minister) Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz.

Asked on the tone of discussions, Dr Mahathir said it was "cordial", adding that there was not much about anything else.

"He (Abdullah) did not answer much, as there were two hours and I spoke for one and a half.

"There was half an hour left and he touched on several issues and then he stopped... so we went back."

On the possibility of another meeting, Dr Mahathir said it was not scheduled.

"I did not say anything about it but he said something that it would be good if I come and see him."

PEJABAT PEMIMPIN PERDANA