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THE Dewan Ra'ayat was today told that monopoly in the newspaper industry was a bigger threat to the freedom of the Press than the licensing of newspapers.

Dr. Mahathir bin Mohamed (All-Kota Star Selatan) said if there was one newspaper in the country, then no matter how dedicated to free speech the Government was, the opinions expressed and the policy followed could very well be controlled by one person or a small group of persons.

Speaking during the debate on the estimates of the Ministry of Home Affairs, he said in effect this would mean that freedom of the Press was denied to their citizens and newspapermen who might disagree with this were few.

"In fact, there would be not only no freedom of the Press, but there could actually be thought control by newspaper owners who are not elected by the people

Firm steps

"Indeed, they are usually a group of selfish capitalists out for a quick dollar," he added. Dr. Mahathir said this situation actually prevailed with the English-language Press in Malaysia and drew attention to the Straits Times Group which "now controls practically all publications in English."

He called on the Government to break the monopoly of the Straits Times Group and the big foreign news bolstering its growth.

There was a need not only to have a free Press in the country but also to break a monopoly that was detrimental to the development of an acceptable character for this nation.

"The Government must reassure the people that the laws concerning publication of newspapers are meant to perpetuate a free Press rather than to suppress it.

"The Government must reassure and indeed encourage those who are in a position to help a free Press to try and sustain the effort of the few to translate a belief into a fact," he said.

"Unless the Government takes firm steps to clear this misunderstanding freedom of the Press will become meaningless and the Government will be blamed for it, instead of the culprits."

It was possible for the Gov-

ernment to use the licensing law to curb a free Press but the power to curb the Press had never been misused by the Government.

It had never been used as it could be used to limit fair criticism of the Government or the party in power.

"If there has been few criticisms in the Press of the Government, it is perhaps because there are few things that the Government does that are grossly wrong," Dr Mahathir continued.

"It may also be because editors are labouring under the misconception that they must praise the Government at all times and for all things.

"Whenever the Government invokes the power to control publications, it has always been due to public interest.

"Writings calculated to incite communal feelings or undermine the peace and security of the nation are what usually makes the Government resort to the withdrawal of licence.

"The number of times that

this has happened is very few indeed.

"Licensing is but one factor that may limit the freedom of the Press. A much greater threat to this freedom is newspaper monopoly."

Directives

He described the Straits Times Group as a "dictator of public opinion" among the English-reading public. It denied others the right to express opinions that were contrary to its policy.

Time and again, some brave souls had tried to break this monopoly, but time and again their assaults had failed.

Among the many reasons they had failed was because

the Straits Times Group was so rich and powerful and could sustain losses that resulted in the less well-financed rivals being choked to death.