

Dr M. OSA critics are overreacting

NST 17 NOV 1986

KUALA LUMPUR, Sun. — Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today that critics of the amendments to the Official Secrets Act (OSA) were "people excited by their own purposely over-translated" implica-

tions of the proposed law.

Dr Mahathir said the fears expressed by these individuals and organisations on the possible abuse of the amended law contradict the way the Act had been enforced.

He said in almost 30 years of the existence of the OSA, the Government had charged only three people in courts.

He added that the Government would take legal action against an individual only if it is obvious that he had revealed classified documents.

He was commenting on the fears expressed by political parties, societies and individuals that the wide-ranging proposed amendments to the OSA could lead to abuse of power — such as possible cover-up of scandals and mismanagement.

Extensive

Critics had also said the amendments infringed certain rights accorded to individuals under the Federal Constitution.

The proposed amendments include a mandatory prison sentence of not more than a year and a maximum of 14 years for possession of classified Government documents and/or their dissemination to the public.

Dr Mahathir also denied that Malaysia was being retrogressive by tightening the OSA while other countries were introducing a Freedom of Information Act in line with the concept of liberal societies.

"Any country in the world which says it has no OSA is telling a lie," he said.

"You will come across OSAs in every country; it is just a question of how

each country formulate these Acts," he added.

He disagreed that the proposed amendments to the OSA were "draconian" in nature.

"In fact, the existing law is more extensive than the amendments now tabled in Parliament.

"The thing is that these critics get excited over their own purposely over-translated implications of the proposed amendments to the OSA, 1972."

On allegations by certain quarters that the proposed amendments violated the rights of individuals as granted in the Federal Constitution, especially to freedom of speech, the Prime Minister said the Government upheld the rights of the community and the majority.

He said Malaysia did not want to follow the West's concept of absolute rights of the individual.

This was because there had been instances in the West where despite protests from the community, the individual's actions could not be stopped since he bandied about his rights as an individual.

He cited the example of an individual's decision to set up a cinema screening pornographic movies in a suburban community which drew protests from the residents.

The authorities were helpless since the individual defended his business by saying that it was his individual right to set up a pornographic cinema.

"This idea of individual rights being more important than those of the community's and the majority's is thus something that we cannot accept here."