

Dr M tackles regional and global issues

Display of wit as he fields questions

By K. BALA

WHEN Singapore's "Mr Opposition", J.B. Jeyaretnam, stood up, one could sense some initial apprehension among the capacity crowd in the Singapore Conference Hall. But Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad merely smiled.

The Workers Party stalwart began his question by identifying himself as required.

"Profession: lawyer, thanks to five learned men in London," he said in an apparent reference to the Privy Council ruling which reinstated him as an advocate and solicitor after being disbarred by the Singapore authorities.

The question posed to Dr Mahathir by J.B. as he is popularly known in the republic, was the difficulty faced by the Opposition in some countries in having their views heard.

The Prime Minister replied, basing his answers on the Malaysian context.

"We are going to give greater participation (to the Opposition in Malaysia). But greater participation in itself may not solve an issue if we have rigid people giving their rigid views. We cannot get a consensus this way."

The problem, he went on to say, was that the Opposition represented extreme racial views.

Closer co-operation

Citing an example, Dr Mahathir said the Government was going to give greater participation to the people in shaping an economic policy to replace the New Economic Policy, which expires in 1990.

"We may call it the Newer Economic Policy," he quipped, evoking laughter from the crowd.

As the laughter subsided, Dr Mahathir, on a more serious note, said he expected

DURING his visit to Singapore last week, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad was interviewed on TV by a panel of five selected by the Singapore Broadcasting Corporation. On Dec 14, Dr Mahathir, who was guest speaker at the Singapore Lecture, also answered a range of questions from the audience.

the ascendancy of pragmatism over dogmatism, especially in the Soviet Union and China.

Similar radical changes, particularly in economy, were taking place in the developed world — the European Community and the United States. Japan was forging ahead with greater impetus.

At the end of his address, former Senior Minister S. Rajaratnam, who chaired the session, opened the floor to questions with a reminder that only questions were welcome and not lectures.

Dr Mahathir was asked for his views both on the home-front — Malaysia and Asean — and happenings in the international arena. The following morning he was interviewed on a Singapore Broadcasting Corporation TV forum by a panel of five with questions on developments in Malaysia, Asean and the world.

At both these sessions, the Malaysian leader was queried about the "resurgence of Islamic fundamentalism" in Malaysia and the region and ethnic relations.

QUOTE

THE indigenous people must have a place which they can truly call their home ... what is the point of independence if they continue to live in poverty the way they did under colonial rule — worse off than the other races ... indigenous people must have a say and rights in their homeland

DR MAHATHIR

tance.

He said the indigenous people must have a place which they can truly call their home.

What is the point of independence if they continue to live in poverty the way they did under colonial rule — worse off than the other races?, he asked.

"Indigenous people must have a say and rights in their homeland," he said, adding that there were many developed countries which preached democracy for others while being oblivious to racial happenings on their own doorstep.

At the moment, he said, the Bumiputeras were not in a position yet to compete with the other races and must be helped.

The Prime Minister was equally in his element when it came to questions on happenings in the international arena — Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's reformist policies, the new Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, US president-elect George Bush and the failure of the GATT talks.

Dr Mahathir said he was excited over Mr Gorbachev's policies when asked whether he gave much weight to the economic reforms initiated by the Soviet leader.

"We must give him a chance. If he succeeds in changing a little (pragmatism over dogmatism) it would be a milestone."

Wrong system

His reasoning was that once people have tasted change, it will be difficult "to go back".

Frankness was again interspersed with humour when an American questioner asked the Prime Minister how he viewed the election of George Bush and the fact that the President had to contend with a

the Opposition, given their divergent backgrounds and views, will not be able to achieve much.

"Probably, they will ask us to go ahead and implement the policy. But greater participation, we will definitely give."

This was the typically candid and witty way the Prime Minister fielded questions during the 40-minute question-and-answer session that followed the Ninth Singapore Lecture organised by the Institute of South-East Asian Studies last Wednesday night.

Dr Mahathir was invited to talk on "Regionalism, globalism and spheres of influence: Asean and the challenge of change into the 21st Century."

Among those present were Singapore Premier Lee Kuan Yew, most of his Cabinet colleagues, eminent academicians and professionals — the elite of Singapore society.

In his address, Dr Mahathir gave an overview of the regional grouping and the challenges ahead.

He emphasised the need for closer economic co-operation among member countries, saying "complementation rather than competition" should be the thrust of Asean's approach in the economic sector, particularly in manufacturing.

This common approach was working very well on the political front and there was no reason why this cohesiveness should not extend to economic co-operation.

Such economic co-operation was now imperative, more than ever in the light of

Passing fad

The Prime Minister explained at length the fallacy of fundamentalism as perceived by many people, especially non-Muslims.

He said there was a marked difference between fundamentalism and extremism.

Calling himself a fundamentalist, he said Muslims like him followed the teachings of Islam while extremists had their own interpretations.

The extremists, he said, were influenced by the happenings in Iran "and were not what the people tended to believe they are."

Allaying fears of some paranoid non-Muslims, Dr Mahathir cited the Hare Krishna movement as an example to drive home his point.

"We don't get all Americans shaving their heads bald or dressing and doing the things the movement's people did."

Similarly, these Islamic extremists are a passing fad.

Anyway, these people are not the power that outsiders think they are, he said.

To a question on the NEP and ethnic relations at home, the Prime Minister made no apologies for the policies. He said as long as there was a discrepancy in the economic status of the Bumiputeras and non-Bumiputeras, such a policy was important.

He said many people were being side-tracked by the issue of Bumiputera-ism, forgetting that alleviation of poverty of all the people was also given equal impor-

Democrat majority in the Senate.

Among other things, he replied that the US administration under Mr Bush would benefit Asean and relations would improve further.

Referring to the Democrat problem for Bush in the Senate, the Prime Minister quipped: "Perhaps the US has a wrong system of Government. But I am in no position to advise them." (Laughter from the floor).

It was time to hit out when the query was on North-South relations and the attitude of the developed world.

Commenting on the failure of the recent GATT talks in Montreal, he said the developed world, because of its clout, carried more weight than the valid reasoning of the poorer nations.

He was also vocal in condemning the West for the double standards that made them impose their values on developing countries.

For example, when these countries felled vast tracts of timber and employed child labour in the guise of progress in the earlier stages of development it was considered a norm.

After having achieved a certain level of development, they cut back on such policies for reasons of humanity, environmental impact and others.

Now they view even planned logging and fair labour laws under a different light and harass the poor countries.

Having been afforded the luxury of all these actions at one time or other, these countries are asking us to follow and are imposing their will and values on others, he said.