

DR M: THE PEN CAN BUILD OR DESTROY

KUALA LUMPUR, Mon. — The press must be free to criticise governments as this is one way to stop them from misusing power, the Prime Minister said today.

However, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said the press must also accept criticism.

He said that "such is the power of the free press that it can bring down governments by influencing the electorate in a democratic country."

Quoting the dictum "power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely," he asked whether it was not possible for the press to be corrupt since it could wield power which could make or break governments.

"If there is no criticism of press freedom or the press is permitted unlicensed freedom, then would not the press be said to wield absolute power and would not it

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— Dr Mahathir on press freedom

then be absolutely corrupt?" he said when opening the 23rd International Chinese Press Convention.

"If the press does not like the government to have absolute power, then by the same token the press must not wield absolute power in moulding public opinion."

Dr Mahathir quipped: "The press in Malaysia is free, but then this is what the Government says."

However, he said the Government "has no

means to get the press to agree with what it says."

"But the fact that the press can say that it is not free means the press is free."

He said that if the press were not free, then it would merely be echoing the Government.

"Paradoxically, therefore, the press is free when it says it is not free, and it is not free when it says it is free."

Dr Mahathir also said keen competition among newspapers and other

publications should not be allowed to develop into an unhealthy practice.

He said that in the West, keen competition among newspapers had resulted in unsavoury practices such as excessive sensationalism, inaccurate and slanted reporting, intrusion into the people's privacy and the buying of stories from criminals.

"There is little concern for the well-being of the community or nation."

He said these compet-

ing publications were only concerned with increasing circulation and making profits.

"In an age when one man's writing can reach hundreds of millions of people worldwide, it is frightening to think of what can happen if the intention of the writer is evil," he said, adding that in the hands of a skilful writer, the pen could help to build or destroy.

Dr Mahathir said the Chinese community had played a very important

role in Malaysia and had contributed towards economic prosperity.

"Their attitude is therefore very important. And to a certain extent, the Chinese press in Malaysia helps form this attitude," he added.

Among those who attended the opening were MCA deputy president Datuk Lee Kim Sai, Gerakan deputy president Kerk Choo Ting, DAP vice-chairman Chian Heng Kai and World Chinese Press Institute vice-president Wang Tih Wu.