

PM: Nation is stable due to Govt's tolerance

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By AZAM ARIS

THE tolerant attitude practised by the country's leadership since independence is the main factor that has made Malaysia so politically stable.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said despite its multi-racial composition and the presumed tendency towards violent conflicts, Malaysia has made very good economic progress throughout the 33 years of its history as a free nation.

"At present, the economy is booming," he said at the opening of the 23rd International Chinese Newspapers Convention, jointly organised by the Chinese Language Press Institute and Nanyang Siang Pau, in Kuala Lumpur yesterday.

The Prime Minister said, in most countries, citizenship requires total cultural and linguistic identification with the definitive people of the country.

"A Chinese Australian, a Chinese American or a Chinese Canadian is more Australian, American or Canadian than a Chinese Malaysian or a Malaysian Chinese is Malaysian.

"Certainly a Chinese in Thailand, Indonesia or the Philippines is more identified with the indigenous people there than a Malaysian Chinese is with the Malays and other indigenous people of Malaysia," he said.

Nevertheless, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir said, Malaysia is a tolerant country and preservation of the root culture of the people has not caused the kind of schism that is seen in many other multi-racial countries.

Except for the one race riot in 1969, the different races in Malaysia have lived in relative harmony.

"It will be hypocritical to say that race relations in Malaysia are ideal. But by comparison we are more able to live together in harmony than many other multi-racial communities in the East, South or the West," he said.

One of the manifestations of racial tolerance in Malaysia is the availability of newspapers in the languages of the different races, including the Chinese, in the country.

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir said a large number of newspapers may mean a liberal policy but it can also result in very violent competition, causing unsavoury practices such as excessive sensationalism, inaccurate and slanted reporting, intrusion into the privacy of citizens and the buying of stories from criminals.

He added that in the information age, the pen as represented by the print and electronic media is, if anything, even more mightier than the sword.

The Prime Minister added that the watchdog role of both the Government and the Press should be balanced — the Press is free to criticise the Government but at same time accept non-Press criticism of itself.

"Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. 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 it not then be absolutely corrupt?"

"The Press in Malaysia is free. But then, this is what the Government says. We have no means to get the Press to agree with what we say. But the fact that the Press can say that it is not free means that the Press is free.

"If it is not free then it will only echo what the Government says. Paradoxically, therefore, the Press is free when it says it is not free and it is not free when it says it is free," Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir said.