

PM: Press must accept criticism

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KUALA LUMPUR, Mon. — The Press, with tremendous power to influence public opinion, should allow itself to be criticised to prevent it from being corrupt, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

The Prime Minister said that if Governments were kept in check by the Press to prevent abuse of power, then there was also a need to check the Press.

"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 said when opening the 23rd international Chinese newspapers' convention at the Shangri-La Hotel.

Dr Mahathir said the saying "the pen is mightier than the sword", was indeed true, particularly in today's information age when news could instantly be made available to viewers worldwide.

"The pen, as represented by the print and electronic media, is, if anything, even more mighty than the sword."

In an age when one man's writing could reach hundreds of millions of people worldwide, it was frightening to think of what could happen if a writer had evil intentions, he said.

Dr Mahathir said although

the pen was mightier than the sword, it was generally considered improper for anyone to restrict or discipline the use of the pen.

"The pen must be free. Any restriction would be considered undemocratic. And indeed this should be so, for any Government which restricts the pen must become oppressive over time.

"The pen must be free to criticise Governments because that is one very important way to stop Governments from misusing power," he said.

Dr Mahathir said it was clear that the Press wielded tremendous power.

But he said that "power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely".

"Is it then not possible for the Press to be corrupted? 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 then be absolutely corrupted?"

Dr Mahathir said he was posing the question because, as one who headed a Government, he was vested with power.

"If I am expected by the Press to give it the freedom to criticise and condemn, and maybe even bring down the Government I

head, should not the Press, also vested with tremendous power, accept non-Press criticism of itself?"

Dr Mahathir said the Press in Malaysia was free and added: "But then this is what the Government says.

"The Government has no means to get the Press to agree with what the Government says."

He said the fact that the Press could say that it was not free meant that the Press was free because if it was not, then it would only echo the Government's stand.

Dr Mahathir added that paradoxically therefore, "a Press is free when it says it is not and is not free when it says it is".

"I would like to leave these thoughts with you, the Chinese Press which, in Southeast Asia at least, caters to a very influential minority community."

Dr Mahathir said the Government regarded as important the role of Malaysian Chinese in the political and economic development of the nation.

Representatives from the Chinese language Press in Asia, Britain, the US and Canada are participating in the convention jointly-organised by the Nanyang Siang Pau and the World Chinese Press Association.