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MALAYSIAN PRESS IS FREE, SAYS MAHATHIR

Mahathir-press

From AzmanUjang

HONG KONG, Oct 14 (Bernama) -- The press in Malaysia is not tame but free although the major newspapers are partisan and supportive of the government, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said here today.

Answering questions before a packed audience at a luncheon hosted by the Foreign Correspondents' Club, he defended the country's Official Secrets Act (OSA) against suggestions that it suppressed press freedom.

He also dismissed suggestions that the government persecuted journalists who report abuses and irregularities within the government administration.

Dr Mahathir, who arrived here yesterday for a three-day visit, fielded questions ranging from the Internal Security Act (ISA) to special privileges for Bumiputeras and press freedom in Malaysia after giving a talk on the +Future of Regional Groupings+ at the luncheon.

A journalist asked why the government was +persecuting reporters from your tame press+ who recently exposed the unauthorised purchase of 22 Volvo cars by the Kuala Lumpur City Hall. -- more

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Dr Mahathir replied that the government, had not persecuted the press as well as certain opposition members for leaking information on the +Volvo Affair+ :

+I do not agree that the press in Malaysia is tame but I would admit that the major newspapers such as the English newspapers are partisan and supportive of the government,+ he said, adding that pro-government newspapers could also be found in other countries.

He told the foreign journalists that it was unfortunate that they could not read Malaysia's highly critical vernacular press to get a more balanced view of press freedom in the country.

The government, he said; allowed the vernacular press to continue to be critical and even libellous of the government and certain personalities but the freedom must be conducted within definite limits of the law, including the OSA.

Turning to the press exposure about the purchase of the Volvo cars, he said: +It is good that people should know about this and action has been taken and -the Mayor of Kuala Lumpur has resigned to take responsibility for it.+ -- more

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But Dr Mahathir said, like other citizens, journalists were not exempted from the OSA and would have to face the consequences if they were found to be in breach of it.

The OSA was not meant to suppress information which was bad for the government, he added.

He said: +You would appreciate the need for a law like OSA if you are in the government. Otherwise, people will be leaking or selling government secrets and there will be chaos.

+We want a responsible press. A very free press is often not responsible .+

Dr Mahathir was asked whether the government had sufficient proof for the arrest of Sabah Foundation director Datuk Dr Jeffrey Kitingan and several others in 1990 for plotting to take Sabah out of Malaysia.

He said: +We have sufficient evidence to detain him but the evidence is not sufficient to convict him in a court of law. That is why we have to use the ISA+. -- more

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The evidence against Dr Kitingan was clear and the government had to nip in the bud the attempt to secede Sabah from Malaysia, he added.

+This is the way we do things in Malaysia. The government has to take early action against any threat to the nation and its security, he said, adding this was the basis for Malaysia's stability and economic prosperity.

He cited examples of countries which had disintegrated because of their failure to deal with threats to their internal security.

Dr Mahathir also told the journalists that some former ISA detainees were running the country today.

+For example, the present Finance Minister was once detained under the ISA. But he has not felt the need to abolish the ISA, he said.

Asked how Malaysia could continue to justify giving special privileges to the Bumiputeras, Dr Mahathir said such privileges were not permanent.

+They are only temporary. Once we feel that the Bumiputeras can compete with the others on equal footing, we will stop the special privileges, he added. -- Bernama

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