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Be fair in reporting, PM urges local press

PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad yesterday called on the local press to have better judgment and to be fair in its reporting.

He said he is somewhat disappointed with the local press on its reporting style. "I am, to a certain degree, disappointed with the local press ...I'm not saying I'm disappointed completely. We expect better judgment and reporting from the local press," he told reporters after opening Perwaja Steel Sdn Bhd's Section and Rolling mill in Gurun, Kedah yesterday.

Dr Mahathir was asked to elaborate on his statement on Saturday that the local media had given prominence to statements made by the DAP and the problems that the party's leaders face.

Citing the press coverage on Kota Melaka member of Parliament Lim Guan Eng's case as an example, Dr Mahathir had said that statements made by Mr Lim Kit Siang (Opposition leader and Guan Eng's father) that there was injustice in court decisions were given prominence.

However, he said, similar misfortunes that befell the ruling party and Government following other court decisions were not highlighted in comparison.

Guan Eng was found guilty and fined RM15,000 by the Malacca High Court on April 28 on a sedition charge and for maliciously making a false publication.

Asked why other leaders had not voiced their stand on the issue, Dr Mahathir said: "They told me that they issued statements but the press never published the statements. That's their complaint to me.

"They said unless the prime minister makes a statement the press just ignores them."

Asked if the local press is abusing its freedom or taking sides on the issue, Dr Mahathir said: "No, I'm not saying that but I just expect you all to be a little bit more fair."

Asked if his criticism against the local press would justify accusations from foreigners that the Government is stifling press freedom here, Dr Mahathir said: "We will be criticised anyway but we must have our say. Nothing we do is ever right.

"They have accused this country of being corrupt and inefficient ... that we are losing money all the time. However, I don't know why other people still want to come here and see what the country is all about."

Asked if all the local press was guilty of over publicising Guan Eng's case or only a certain section of it, the prime minister said:

"You know ... publicising Kit Siang's argument that we are undemocratic and that the Attorney-General is biased and all that ... if the A-G is biased he wouldn't have taken us to court ... even though one of our candidates was found not guilty, he lost his seat. I don't know the logic."

Dr Mahathir was obviously referring to the Barisan Nasional candidate in the Begunan state seat in Sarawak whose victory was declared null and void because someone was said to have given money to someone else.

The prime minister also touched on Kit Siang's letter to the New Straits Times in response to the Other Thots column written by NST Group Editor Datuk A. Kadir Jasin.

"I saw Kit Siang's letter to the NST complaining that Kadir did not understand his complaint ... that is Kit Siang's view.

"But our view is that we have been losing cases in the court ... much more serious cases. Yet there was no reaction the way the press, especially the foreign press, reacted to Guan Eng being fined more than RM2,000."

Dr Mahathir also cited a court case where Kit Siang should have been fined more than RM2,000 but the court later reduced the fine.

"He should have been fined more than RM2,000 but the court bent over backwards to give him a lower fine.

"Now why is it necessary for the court to bend over backwards ... it is almost a political decision and not a decision based on the case," he said.

Kit Siang was in 1978, charged, convicted and fined RM15,000 on five charges relating to the disclosure of secret information regarding the purchase of four fast strike craft by the navy two years earlier. He appealed to the Federal Court and successfully had the fine for each of the charge reduced to less than RM2,000.

In his column, Kadir wrote that it was not surprising to hear Kit Siang accusing the A-G of what he called "selective prosecution".

"It is only to be expected that the DAP chief will use all resources and tactics at his disposal in support of his son and at the same time paint a negative picture of the judicial system."

Kit Siang replied to this through a letter which was published in the NST yesterday.

Among other things, the letter claimed that Other Thots "has been most misleading as the issue I had raised was about the A-G's misuse of his discretionary powers on prosecution and not about the independence of the judiciary or government interference with the courts."

He added: "Let me clarify that I had at no time questioned or challenged the decision of the Malacca High Court finding Guan Eng guilty of the offences of sedition and publishing false news.

"I may not agree with the judgment of the court but I fully accept that any challenge of its decision must be made at the Court of Appeal, which Guan Eng has done..."

Touching on the court ruling which declared Umno as an unlawful party, Dr Mahathir said never in the history of democratic politics anywhere in the world had a party which formed the Government declared as "haram" (illegal).

"It happened to us but yet people keep on accusing us of meddling with the courts and doing all kinds of funny things ... I can't understand that.

"In fact a judge who made several decisions against us was even promoted ... but that's Malaysia.

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