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## Ensuring NGOs are not exploited by certain parties

PETALING JAYA, Sun. - The Government will conduct a comprehensive study on non-governmental organisations in the country to ensure they are not exploited for the benefit of certain parties.

Deputy Home Minister Datuk Seri Megat Junid Megat Ayub said the Government also had to think of ways to bring the NGOs under the control of the Registrar of Societies, Bernama reports.

The organisations must operate properly by holding annual general meetings, having office-bearers as well as proper financial accounts, he told reporters at the Sultan Abdul Aziz Shah International Airport in Subang today.

Besides scrutinising the NGOs' sources of funds, Megat Junid said the study would also examine whether they had the interests of the public at heart or they benefited only a handful of individuals.

The Umno supreme council at its meeting yesterday expressed dissatisfaction with the NGOs for using companies as fronts to act as pressure groups and criticise the Government.

"Lately, we found that the NGOs have been exploited for the benefit of a few individuals in criticising the police force and disgracing the country's sovereignty," Megat Junid said.

"Before this gets out of hand, it's better that we have a check-and-balance mechanism."

According to him, as voluntary bodies, the NGOs should assist the public and not work for the benefit of certain individuals only.

Citing Pemadam as an example, he said the association was not meant to assist Pemadam members but those who were facing dadah abuse problems.

"If Pemadam is being used for the benefit of members in getting awards and positions, then it is pointless," said Megat Junid, who is also president of the association.

Meanwhile, several NGOs said they believed their views and actions represented that of the people, saying accountability was always weighed before they expressed themselves.

They felt their views, whether negative or positive, were made in the interests of the country and its people but agreed that there were some organisations which acted as fronts for people with vested interests.

Environmental Protection Society adviser Gurmit Singh said NGOs should not be looked at solely as a machinery to criticise but instead as a platform for offering suggestions and a multitude of views.

He argued that distinguishing a good NGO from a bad one was very subjective, saying the authorities must first prove that NGOs had deviated from their objectives before taking any action.

"In any democratic society, the role of any community group, political or otherwise, is to present views on certain issues.

"Some will praise and others criticise. It is not fair to say NGOs only criticise.

"If NGOs are quiet, people will say we are not doing our job. If they criticise and present their views, suddenly we are looked at as being damaging or negative."

Pointing out the deficiencies, he added, should not be misconstrued as NGOs having malicious intent but rather as constructive criticisms aimed at improving the country.

Yesterday, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said some NGOs

were being exploited by certain individuals and used as pressure groups.

Dr Mahathir said there were NGOs registered with the Registrar of Companies and others with the Registrar of Societies, pointing out that some were not being properly managed.

On criticism that NGOs did not play an active role in international issues, Gurmit said the priority for local NGOs was to focus on issues in Malaysia or pertaining to it.

He said some NGOs were registered as companies because there were no laws prohibiting this practice.

But this, he added, should not be made an issue because those which were registered as companies had greater accountability as their funds and records had to be audited by an external auditor. NGOs registered with the ROS need to have their accounts audited by just an internal auditor.

"The accountability is there regardless of whether the NGO is registered as a company or society."

Pemadam vice-president Datuk Lee Lam Thye said responsible and credible NGOs could play a very important role in nation-building by offering constructive views on a wide range of issues.

On some NGOs registering as a society and others as a company, he said this would not pose a problem as long as the leaders of these bodies were accountable to their members.

"The Government should also seriously consider how the Societies Act can be used to facilitate the formation of respectable and creditable NGOs.

"Presently, certain NGOs have resorted to the Companies Act to register themselves because of the difficulties they encountered under the Societies Act," he said.

Lee said if NGOs performed their duties responsibly and justly, they would not only be able to enjoy the confidence and support of their members but also the public.

Meanwhile, vice-president of the National Council of Women's Organisations, F.R. Bhupalan, supported Dr Mahathir's views that NGOs should champion the cause of the people and those who formed their membership.

"It is totally unacceptable to us that the views of one or two individuals with vested interests, should lead to any NGO action," she said, adding that every NGO had the responsibility to ensure such incidents did not occur.

Bhupalan called for NGOs to be properly registered, saying it was vital that no action be taken by an NGO without its executive board's approval. Any action taken must also be within the objectives of that NGO.

"NGOs have a responsibility to voice certain points or cases.

"This, however, has to be undertaken with great care after serious study and investigations. It must be done with a strong sense of responsibility, taking note that there should be no further deterioration in the nation's stability."

Meanwhile, Suara Rakyat Malaysia, in a statement, said one of the reasons some NGOs opted to register as companies was because of the conditions and restrictions imposed by the Society Act Amendment (1982).

The statement said in a civil society, individuals should be allowed to gather and establish any form of organisation without further restrictions to the already excessive control on the activities of NGOs.

"As the Prime Minister has acknowledged, the role of NGOs is to offer critical and constructive suggestions on how we can improve our nation. NGOs are crucial pillars in the building of a civil society.

"When NGOs try to fulfil their responsibilities, some sections of the administration might be criticised but not with the intention to undermine public confidence."

Suaram said NGOs were always willing and open to holding dialogues and discussions with the Government to enhance mutual understanding.

Citing the issue of the Tribunal Rakyat, Suaram said in response to objections from the police force, the organisers had postponed the event indefinitely and were awaiting a dialogue with the police.

The statement said the NGOs' actions and criticisms had served to increase the public's confidence in the police force and democracy in the country.

Suaram also urged the Government to maintain an understanding and open mind towards the role of NGOs.

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