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PM: Untruth a form of corruption (HL)

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KUALA LUMPUR, Thurs. - The Prime Minister today questioned the motives of certain media organisations which often reported untruths, saying that this was also a form of corruption and abuse of power.

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said: "The media often condemns the Government for misuse of power, abuse of power and corruption. But is it not corruption and abuse of power to do which you know is wrong simply because you have power over the media?"

The Prime Minister, however, did not specify whether the media organisations he was referring to were foreign or Malaysian. He was speaking at the opening of the Nihon Keizai Shimbun Incorporated's Kuala Lumpur bureau here.

Nihon Keizai Shimbun is a global media company founded in Japan 121 years ago. It publishes the Nihon Keizai Shimbun, which it claims is the largest business daily in the world as well as a host of other newspapers and magazines.

It also runs the Nikkei Satellite News.

With the setting up of the bureau here, Nikkei now has 12 bureaus in Asia and 31 in the world.

Dr Mahathir said the Press which did not report accurately was doing a disservice to its subscribers who paid them good money to support their existence.

"There is really nothing to be gained by tenacious reporting and by passing scurrilous remarks which are not based on facts at all," he said.

He added that to accuse the Government of controlling the Malaysian Press would be wrong as there were many newspapers which did not support the Government.

"It has been said that we control the Press in Malaysia. I would like to point out that those who say this never bothered to read the vernacular Press (traditionally used to refer to the non-English newspapers) which has nothing good to say about the Government.

"Some of them do support the Government. But this is normal. In any country, there are papers which support the different (political) parties.

"It is the same in Malaysia. It so happens that some of the English language papers support the Government but there are others which never support the Government. If there was no Press freedom in this country, there will never be such papers."

He said in Britain, there were newspapers supporting the ruling Conservative Party while some supported Labour.

Dr Mahathir said although the reports on him in Opposition-controlled newspapers were mostly libellous, he chose not to sue them as he believed in Press freedom.

He added that although in Malaysia there was Press freedom, the Government also expected Press responsibility.

"If you start stirring up racial hatred in a country which is multi-racial like Malaysia, you are going to damage the country and the majority of the people who do not want any violence.

"The Government has a duty and the Press also has a duty. You can protest, but you cannot disrupt the peace and harmony in this country."

Dr Mahathir said Malaysia believed in democracy with responsibility.

"Albania, I am sorry to say, was an authoritarian State. Today, Albania is democratic because the West wanted it to be democratic."

"And as it is democratic, people took to the streets and demonstrated. They brought down the Government and as a result, they have a state of anarchy.

"The system that brought about the kind of anarchy in Albania, cannot be good."

He said democracy was a great system of governance as it gave the people the opportunity to change their leaders and the Government whenever they wanted to.

"I myself have lost elections and you know very well that in Malaysia it is possible for the Opposition members to win seats and appear in Parliament. In fact, different States in Malaysia have even fallen to the Opposition."

Dr Mahathir also took a swipe at the foreign news agencies whom he said only reported on negative issues and ignored the positive ones.

"But I would say that Malaysia is not an exception. That is the common practice of news agencies because sensational and negative reports attract more readers and subscribers.

"Therefore, in order to make money you should highlight the negative aspects of everything that you report.

"This is unfortunate because there is a need for good and accurate reporting because the report is used (by investors and businessmen) to make decisions," he said.

Dr Mahathir added that Malaysia had time and again been reported as a country that was about to break into racial violence.

"According to these reports, the Chinese, Malays and Indians are apparently incompatible. They are not only different by reason of race but also culture, language and religion.

"In fact, the people of Malaysia are so incompatible that they cannot even eat at the same table. This is because if you put pork on the table, the Malays will just walk out. On the other hand, the Malays love beef and the Indians don't take beef.

"So, strictly speaking, we cannot really get on with each other. But we do get on. In fact, Malaysia is much more peaceful than some of the European countries, where off-and-on ethnic violence takes place. Even in America, there is ethnic violence."

He said different ethnic groups, with different cultures and religions, managed to work together to build the country to what it is today.

Malaysia's economic performance is largely the result of political stability.

"Not many countries are politically stable these days. Even the developed countries are not stable."

Dr Mahathir hoped the Nihon Keizai Shimbun would play a role in encouraging more Japanese investors to invest in Malaysia.

"Accuracy by the Nihon Keizai Shimbun is very important because I feel certain that people would want to read more reports which are accurate and can serve the purpose of making decisions," he said.

He said investors and traders needed information before they could trade with any country.

He said about 25 per cent of investments in Malaysia came from Japan and the fact that there were many Japanese investors in Malaysia was probably because they did not read the usual reports about Malaysia from foreign news agencies.

"If they read those reports, they probably would not come to Malaysia because invariably the reports are very negative.

"If there is anything bad happening, it is blown up 10 times and if there is anything good happening in Malaysia, that is not reported at all."

Dr Mahathir said Malaysia welcomed foreign investment and would continue to encourage investors to set up their businesses here.

"We were one of the few countries which, on achievement of independence, did not become ultra-nationalistic.

"Instead, we went the other way and invited more foreign participation in our economy and the results have been gratifying."

Dr Mahathir said Malaysia planned to maintain a growth rate of seven per cent until the year 2020, when it hoped to become a fully developed nation.

"That is not such a big target considering that we have grown at the rate of 6.7 per cent for 20 years during the New Economic Policy (1971-1991).

"We need only another 0.3 per cent. But as you know, in the past nine years, we have been growing at a rate of more than eight per cent. In 1995, for example, we grew at a rate of 9.6 per cent. It is not unthinkable that we will be able to achieve our target of seven per cent per year until the year 2020," he said.

Also present during the opening of Nihon Keizai Shimbun bureau was its president Takuhiko Tsuruta and president of Japan Chamber of Trade and Industry in Malaysia president Tan Sri K. Suzuki.

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