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Special panel set up to streamline syariah laws

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THE Umno Supreme Council approved yesterday the setting up of a special committee to streamline Malaysia's syariah laws and repeal those practised by state governments that are inconsistent with Islamic teachings.

The proposed committee, to be chaired by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, will comprise experts from various fields.

Dr Mahathir, who is the party's president, said the proposed committee will submit its proposals on ways to streamline the syariah laws to the Rulers' Conference.

Speaking at a press conference after chairing a four-hour supreme council meeting in Kuala Lumpur, he said: "We want the Islamic laws practised in the country to be implemented in a manner that can further improve the image of Islam."

The Umno Supreme Council, he said, is of the opinion that there has been some misconception on the status of religious officials such as ulamaks and muftis.

There are many people who claim to be ulamaks whose views must not be questioned. "This is not correct."

In the case of muftis, Dr Mahathir said a mufti is an adviser given the authority to issue a fatwa when there are confusions in the interpretation of Islam.

"It is not the mufti's right to issue fatwas as he wishes. Even though the muftis have the authority, they cannot simply make a fatwa ... fatwas issued by muftis need not become a law until they are gazetted by state governments," he added.

Dr Mahathir said there are certain syariah laws in the states that give muftis the authority to issue and revoke fatwas.

"Muftis should only issue fatwas after discussing with a panel of learned persons, and they need not just be learned in the Islamic field," he added.

Asked whether enforcement of the syariah laws will be put on hold until they are streamlined, Dr Mahathir said state religious councils should defer the implementation of new laws that may raise questions to ensure that Muslims are not victimised.

On the recent move by the Selangor Islamic Religious Council to arrest and prosecute three Muslim women who took part in a beauty contest, Dr Mahathir said: "Although we (Umno) agree that there should not be beauty contests involving Muslims, the way we should stop that is through advice. Islam itself requires us not to always use force but instead advise people in correcting wrongdoings," he added.

On the possibility that the move to review syariah laws will be turned into a political issue by opposition parties, Dr Mahathir said Umno will not be surprised if PAS does so.

"We believe it will be made a political issue because these people (PAS members) do not hold on to their religion ... but only to their political party," he said.

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