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Violence, street demos not the answer (HL)

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KUALA LUMPUR, Mon. - The Prime Minister today told an international conference of editors and writers that violent street demonstrations were not the answer to solving political disagreements.

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said that although violent demonstrations had worked in Indonesia where President Suharto was forced to step down, such street justice would not work in Malaysia because it was not part of the country's tradition nor its legal system.

Dr Mahathir was responding to a question from the editor-in-chief of Post Newspapers Ltd of Zambia, Fred M'membe, at the 22nd Commonwealth Press Union Biennial Conference at Shangri-La Hotel.

"The Government in Malaysia cannot be brought down by street demonstrations. Demonstrations cannot make decisions for us," he said, adding that members of the Government were elected through the democratic process.

Ironically, Dr Mahathir said, Ministers were being sacked throughout the world but nobody questioned such dismissals.

However, he said, when former Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim was sacked, many people objected to it.

"All the other Ministers who were sacked decided to leave quietly but he (Anwar) chose to hold demonstrations after his removal."

Dr Mahathir said currently, there were attempts to topple the Government through street demonstrations and other undemocratic ways.

"How can the media support this attempt and at the same time talk about democracy? Support the opponents of the Government by all means but the media must not advocate an undemocratic overthrow of the Government.

"I don't know about other countries, but in Malaysia, the Opposition can win the elections and form the Government. I myself have lost an election before.

"I am perhaps the only dictator who has to stand for elections before dictating."

Dr Mahathir said in Malaysia, Ministers had been charged in court for various offences and were found guilty but there were no demonstrations and charges that the court was biased.

The Prime Minister said Anwar was only removed after he consulted all the Menteri Besar and Chief Ministers, who felt he should be sacked because he was not fit to be the next Prime Minister.

In his speech, Dr Mahathir urged the international media to rethink its role for the future of mankind and spare temptations to misuse its enormous power.

He said this was especially so because the media had a role to play in promoting a positive concept of good neighbourliness in the global village and shaping a new culture of sharing.

He said as much as the international media reported on those agitating the Governments in developing countries, the government side should also be given a fair exposure.

"The international media never gives the government side an airing. In fact, it distorts reports about the Government and goes so far as to fabricate unflattering stories about the Government."

Dr Mahathir said the Press was a very powerful institution which was often tempted to misuse power.

He said Malaysia had never had a good Press as none of its positive

achievements were reported.

He said a multi-racial country that was stable and economically successful was not a subject of interest to the powerful among the international media.

"But a failure of any kind makes a good copy. And so every time Malaysia appears on television for whatever reason, the pictures of rioting and the famous black eye are shown," he said referring to Anwar, who appeared in court on Sept 29 with a black eye which he alleged was a result of police brutality.

Dr Mahathir said the black eye (on Anwar) was being investigated and the guilty party would be punished. There would be no cover-up, he said.

"I must be crazy if I wanted the black eye which the police then paraded before the world through the media, print and electronic.

"Yet the media implied that the Malaysian dictator is presiding over a police state where giving black eyes to prisoners is common practice. Indeed one writer said that the subject was beaten to pulp," he said.

Dr Mahathir did not name the writer who said this but former Hong Kong Governor Chris Patten said this in an article he wrote in the newspaper, The Independent, on Oct 11.

In the article headlined "We must defend the Finance Minister with a black eye," Patten said Anwar was "beaten to a pulp ... being beaten up by the police, blindfolded and thrashed until he lost consciousness".

Dr Mahathir said the international media gave the impression that Malaysia was in a state of perpetual turmoil, a police state where police brutality was daily or even an hourly occurrence.

"Occasionally, pictures of armoured cars manned by African blacks are shown when reporting about the demonstrations without explaining how these Africans came to be driving armoured cars in Malaysia.

"I am not denying that there have been some rioting and breaking into buildings by the rioters.

"The police may have been rough but you can compare their handling of the demonstrators with the handling by European and American law enforcement officers.

"Invariably, the latter are more brutal," he said.

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