

13/07/1999

Anwar no longer a big issue now, says Dr Mahathir

Patvinder Singh

KUALA LUMPUR, Mon. - Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today said the Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim matter was not much of an issue in the country now.

"It is fading. It is not that much of an issue now. There are still people who are not convinced but we will try to convince them of the rightness of what we have decided to do."

Dr Mahathir was asked how much of an issue Anwar was in Malaysia while being interviewed today on CNBC's Asia Wrap programme by Rico Huzon.

On why he made Anwar the centrepiece of his speech at the recent Umno general assembly, if his former deputy was a non-issue, Dr Mahathir said it was to cater for those who were still doubting.

Asked what he would say to Anwar if he met him right now, Dr Mahathir said: "Nothing, I won't meet him."

On when he expected to hold the general election, Dr Mahathir said it would be any time before July next year.

On how much clout the Opposition had, he said according to some observers the Opposition had a great deal of clout but the same was said in 1990 where it was reported that the Opposition would win but was instead trounced.

On the Opposition's claim that it had the numbers now to deny the Barisan Nasional a two-thirds majority, he said the Opposition was having problems and could not agree on many things.

He said while one member of the Opposition coalition talked of taking Perlis out of Malaysia if it won, another member said "not on your life".

"They are quarrelling among themselves even before they win anything," he said, adding that allotting of seats was already a problem to the Opposition and there would be other problems.

Asked if he was ready to face Anwar's wife Datin Seri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail in his Kubang Pasu constituency, he said she could contest anywhere.

"If she wants to contest in my constituency I have no choice but to face her."

On Information Minister Tan Sri Mohd Khalil Yaacob's statement that the Opposition would not be given air-time in the run-up to the election, he said the Government was not given any time in the foreign media as it only interviewed people who were friendly to the Opposition.

"So it is not fair that, on the one hand, they keep everything to themselves and, on the other hand, they want what we have."

On reports that the campaign period would be a maximum of nine days, he said it had been done before without any complaints.

Asked how many seats Umno would garner if the election was held today, he said during the Sabah State election it was said that Umno would lose.

"A lot of people will of course predict that Umno is going to lose. We will wait and see who is right and who is wrong."

Asked if he would be ready to retire after the general election, he said he would have to retire some time after the election.

"I don't know whether sooner or later. I am always ready to retire. In fact I would have retired last year except for the mess created by my deputy."

Asked if Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi was his likely successor, he said: "In our system, yes, he is the most likely

successor."

On whether voters were more sophisticated now after the "Anwar saga", he said Malaysian voters had always been sophisticated and that was why they decided to vote for one or two opposition candidates.

He said Malaysian voters were thinking voters although there were a core of voters who would vote for the opposition no matter what they were told or what facts were shown to them.

"They are fanatics. With them we can do nothing."

On his relationship with the Western media, he admitted it was not too good as they for some reasons disliked him and would do everything possible to give him a bad image.

He said people who visited Malaysia, however, had a different perception.

(END)