

09 JUN 1999

Mahathir-Election

CONSERVATIVE VOTERS PREFER NO SUDDEN CHANGES, SAYS MAHATHIR

KUALA LUMPUR, June 9 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today Malaysian voters are generally conservative and do not like sudden changes that may disrupt their lives.

Given this scenario, he said he was fairly confident the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition would retain power in the next general election.

" I'm fairly confident although I cannot be absolutely certain. So most of them are likely to vote for the ruling party," he said in an exclusive interview with CNBC, the Singapore-based regional television channel, which was telecast tonight.

Dr Mahathir was asked by CNBC "Asia Tonight" anchorman Martin Soong if the BN was confident of retaining its two-thirds majority in Parliament at the polls widely expected to be held later this year.

Dr Mahathir was asked about some states like Terengganu, Kedah and Perlis becoming vulnerable to Islamic party, PAS, which now controls Kelantan, at the next election, and whether he had plans to change the Menteri Besar (chief ministers) of these states.

" Of course we cannot be absolutely certain as to who should be the candidates (in the election). But at the moment we have no intention to change the chief ministers unless of course something unusual happens," he said.

The prime minister however admitted that the BN was facing problems in some states.

" But we do face problem in these states and I think we can handle these problems," said Dr Mahathir, who is also BN chairman.

Dr Mahathir also spoke of PAS playing up Islam as an election issue to woo the Muslim votes.

" There is an even chance of them (PAS) being able to influence the people on the basis of religion. But the people are better educated now and we have have also been able to explain that these people are just making use of the religion," the prime minister said.

Dr Mahathir said PAS leaders in their desire to defend some of their people had even said things which were unIslamic and he believed the party was not as strong as it claimed among the people.

The prime minister was also asked to comment on recent controversial remarks purportedly made by then Information Minister Datuk Mohamed Rahmat that opposition Parti Keadilan Nasional president Datin Seri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail could not lead Malaysia because she is of Chinese descent.

" I don't know what he (Mohamed) actually said. It may be misinterpreted. But I think he is the last person who would make that kind of remark really because in Malaysia we have people of Chinese origin who were adopted and brought by Malays as Malays. That is not a big issue. People have now adjusted well to race relations in the country," Dr Mahathir said.

Mohamed was dropped in a minor Cabinet reshuffle last month.

Dr Mahathir was also asked about youths and how the government was trying to keep their support.

While acknowledging that they have been neglected all these while, Dr Mahathir said that the government was trying to get closer to them now.

"Making contacts with youths. We neglected them, that I must admit. We don't go to the universities and disturb them while they are studying. But the opposition spent their time in the universities, even sleeps in the

universities in order to get the youths on their side.

"And the youths feel that we neglect them. Actually we are concerned about their studies. We don't want to disturb them. But now it is necessary for us to communicate with them. When they learn about the facts, I think they will change their views about us," Dr Mahathir said.

-- BERNAMA

RV AU RYN