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Kuan Yew-Malaysia

MALAYSIA WON'T GO FUNDAMENTALIST, SAYS LEE KUAN YEW

KUALA LUMPUR, Dec 13 (Bernama) -- Singapore's Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew said it is unlikely that Malaysia will become fundamentalist given the outcome of its recently-concluded general election.

"No, I don't think so. It was a good election result for (Prime Minister Datuk Seri) Dr Mahathir (Mohamad)," he said during an interview with CNBC Asia which was aired last night. A transcript of the interview was made available to Bernama.

The question stemmed from the fact that the opposition party PAS, which is pushing for an Islamic state, has been able to wrest Terengganu from the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition while consolidating its grip on neighbouring Kelantan.

Lee was asked what he made of the results of the Nov 29 election and whether there was a danger of Malaysia becoming fundamentalist.

He said looking at the results, PAS could not win unless Malaysia became Islamic and the things the party did since winning, like making Terengganu Islamic and wanting to tax non-Muslim enterprises, would just scare secular groups.

"I mean not just Chinese and Indians but Malays who want a modern, thriving and bustling Malaysia. So I do not think it's likely to go fundamentalist.

"There are certain pockets of it but I cannot imagine PAS winning Sabah, Sarawak and heavily populated, advanced, more developed states on the West Coast or Johor," he said.

In the elections, the BN was returned to power with a two-thirds majority. Dr Mahathir went on to announce his new Cabinet line-up on Dec 10.

Lee described the prime minister as a fighter who had fought very hard.

"Any other prime minister faced with that barrage of opposition and international media downgrading him and writing him off would have melted away," he said.

Lee said Dr Mahathir fought an aggressive campaign and knew where his problems were as he spotlighted the four northern Malay heartland states.

"He won two, he lost two. So he expected that to be a battleground," he said. Lee was alluding to Kedah and Perlis where the BN was able to fend off the opposition's attempts to capture them.

He said Dr Mahathir had embarked on the right strategy of consolidating his legacy to Malaysia through his modernist approach, as mirrored in the prime minister's penchant for science and technology, getting Malaysians to support the Multimedia Super Corridor project and his desire to break into high-tech and get the people to go along with him.

"And I think more important or most important of all for Malaysia, his secular philosophy of government. He once told some Muslim doctors that you cannot examine a female patient by probing her with a pencil instead of palpating her.

"Now for a Muslim leader to say that, it needs courage and he has got that," said the senior minister.

When asked on his opinion whether Dr Mahathir would stick by his statement that it would be his last five-year term, Lee said: "I think he must have at the back of his mind a plan to preserve his legacy.

"I mean to come to a stage when there is nothing more you can achieve more important than to leave behind a system, a government, a society and

leaders who can carry on your work."

He said Dr Mahathir had carried Malaysia thus far and it was his (Lee's) belief that the Malaysian leader must be "thinking very hard" how to get a team to carry it further.

Lee said the issue of succession had become a problem in Malaysia as Dr Mahathir spent 17 years nurturing former deputy prime minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

"He reposed complete confidence in the man and nurtured him and I know many leaders who have told me that they were surprised when Anwar was charged because Mahathir himself has said this is his successor.

"So, I think it was a very big setback, a big blow for both of them. But as I said at the time, I think it was a bigger blow for Mahathir because his succession plan broke down."

Anwar is serving a six-year jail term after he was found guilty of abusing his power and is currently being tried for sodomy.

Queried on the biggest regret of his career, Lee said being asked to leave Malaysia was a very "big blow".

"We invested so much effort, so much of our hopes and to have given up in less than two years was painful," he said.

Singapore joined Malaysia in 1963 together with Sabah and Sarawak but separated in 1965.

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