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PM: This isn't toughest election for BN

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PUTRAJAYA, Thurs. - Despite all the hype, the Prime Minister does not think that the 1999 general election is the toughest yet encountered by the Barisan Nasional.

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said the election in 1990 was more tense and challenging.

Citing reasons, Dr Mahathir said that year, about 85,000 Umno members left the party together with several Cabinet Ministers and Umno supreme council members.

"There were very few leaders of calibre left especially in the supreme council ... the 1999 election is not challenging," he said in reply to a question after briefing mass media editors on the general election at his office here.

Also present was Umno secretary-general Tan Sri Khalil Yaakob.

Dr Mahathir was asked whether he agreed with the belief among certain quarters that this election posed a greater challenge to the Barisan Nasional than that in 1990.

He said the only difference was that this time there was a possibility that riots would take place.

"People who will use illegal means will make this election different," he remarked.

Comparing the 1995 general election, the Prime Minister said that was "extraordinary" because the economy was good and there was a lot of support from the people.

Earlier, Dr Mahathir, who is Barisan Nasional chairman, gave the assurance that the Nov 29 election would proceed smoothly although he anticipated that certain quarters would cause some trouble especially during the few days leading to polling day in areas where the Opposition appears to have a slim chance of winning.

He also anticipated attempts to use thugs to disrupt the Barisan Nasional election campaigns.

However, he said, the security forces were ready and capable of handling the situation and would act firmly to prevent any such attempts.

Dr Mahathir said the Opposition would make all sorts of accusations a few days before polling to arouse anger among their supporters against the Barisan Nasional, including alleging that this election was not being conducted fairly and equitably.

Asked why there was such anticipation of trouble, Dr Mahathir said this could be linked to the personality in question who often used demonstrations as an excuse as far back as 1974.

This personality clearly had no respect for the rule of law, he added.

"We think he will again use this," he said, pointing out that creating mischief, demonstrations and rioting were recent phenomena in the country.

"We used to see these things in other countries ... and this is being imported into the country."

On the possibility that voters would be discouraged from voting if there were signs of trouble, Dr Mahathir said he was confident of the police force's ability to keep the situation under control so that people could vote without fear.

The Prime Minister was asked several questions on election issues including the selection of candidates, the Opposition and on the Barisan Nasional's plans for the future.

Asked on the fate of leaders associated with former Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, Dr Mahathir said their association with Anwar was not a criterion for selection as candidate.

What would be considered would be their attitude and their loyalty to the party. But loyalty to the party alone was not a criterion not to be dropped.

"We will have to drop them just as we do others who are equally loyal to the party to give place to new ones."

Asked about the fate of former Semangat 46 members who have been reconciled with Umno, Dr Mahathir said Umno was not looking at their history but their loyalty as well as their willingness to co-operate and whether they could win.

On whether he thought Pas was a bigger threat than either Parti Keadilan Nasional or DAP, Dr Mahathir said Pas was inclined to make things bigger than they really were to make themselves happy.

Pas would even field candidates in areas where they could not win just to convince their supporters.

They were prepared to lose their deposits as long as they were visible in many constituencies.

On qualities needed to be a Cabinet Minister, Dr Mahathir said one should be popular as well as have abilities to carry out the duties as a Minister.

It was not enough to have only one of these, he said, adding that unfortunately people with the perfect combination were hard to come by.

On attempts to have foreign observers during the election, Dr Mahathir said Malaysia was a free and independent country and did not need them.

He expressed the hope that "other people" would not attempt to interfere in "our domestic affairs".

Asked to comment on the issue of legitimacy of polling raised by the DAP and academician Dr Jomo Kwame Sundram, Dr Mahathir said the process of voter registration was thorough.

He said it needed time for verification and review which could take as long as six months.

"If Jomo was responsible, he should have been a voter a long time ago ... he is complaining now but before this he did not," he said.

Asked whether Jomo should continue lecturing at Universiti Malaya given his anti-government sentiments, Dr Mahathir said he should quit and go into politics.

Reflecting on his decision to join politics during the early days of his medical career, Dr Mahathir said he made a choice to leave the civil service and open a private practice to avoid running foul of the General Orders.

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