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PM: Brief election campaign is constitutional (HL)

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LANGKAWI, Sun. - The short period allowed for political parties to campaign before polling is constitutional, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said, adding that this was a provision made after the bloody 1969 riots.

The Prime Minister said the provision was made after the irresponsible attitude of opposition parties in 1969 which led to the May 13 riots when many people died.

Dr Mahathir was asked to comment on a statement by DAP secretary-general Lim Kit Siang who said that the short campaign period was unconstitutional and should be extended to about three weeks.

Dr Mahathir said: "It is constitutional ... we decided to have shorter campaign periods as we know the behaviour of the opposition which likes to hurl allegations that can cause tension among the people like what happened in 1969.

"As a responsible Government, it is our duty to protect the lives of citizens and not just give in to demands from the opposition."

The campaign period is fixed by the Election Commission. It is fixed after the commission has decided on the election dates. A period of between seven and 15 days is normally provided for campaigning.

Section 3(1) of the Elections (Conduct of Elections) Regulations 1981 says:

"On the issue of a writ in accordance with the provisions of section 12 of the Elections Act 1958, the Election Commission shall publish a notice thereof in the Gazette and such notice shall specify the date on which candidates for election are to be nominated, which in these regulations is referred to as the "day of nomination", not being less than four days after the date of the publication of such notice, and the date or dates on which the polls will be taken in the event of a contest (referred to in these regulations as the "polling date"), not being less than seven days after the day of nomination."

On claims by the opposition that a short campaign period would favour the ruling party, Dr Mahathir scoffed at the suggestion and pointed out that the opposition had started campaigning since two years ago.

"In fact, Kit Siang had predicted the general election will be held in 1997 and then changed it to 1998.

"During the past two years, his party had been campaigning and had organised ceramah all over the country.

"Pas too had started going around villages hurling lies, especially against me. Now they have the cheek to say that the campaign period is too short and favours the Government."

Asked on the move by the opposition to have a common manifesto for the next election, Dr Mahathir quipped: "They can come up with a common and uncommon manifesto."

He believes that Pas would drop its Islamic State concept as the proposal had been merely a political ploy to gain support of Muslims against Umno.

"Because the concept is not acceptable to DAP, Pas is now prepared to drop it.

"The party has no principles and every time there is a general election, it changes its tune."

However, the Barisan Nasional stood by its principles and only changed slogans for the elections, Dr Mahathir said.

Asked on speculations that recently appointed Kelantan Umno liaison chief Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah would be appointed a Minister, he replied that he was hearing it for the first time.

Asked to comment on corporate figures reportedly joining Parti Keadilan, Dr Mahathir said they were ungrateful people who were of no use to Umno.

He said some of these people were ungrateful. Contrary to the claim that only figures who claimed to get nothing from the Government had joined the opposition, he said even those who had benefited had crossed over.

"We cannot trust such people and Umno is better off without them."

He said it was the Government that had helped such people become wealthy in the good times by creating a conducive climate to enable them to become successful businessmen. While some of these people had joined the opposition, many were still grateful and continued to support the Government.

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