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PM exchanges views with students (HL)

Ramlan Said; Chok Suat Ling

BANGI, Thurs. - Students from the country's 11 public and four private universities swarmed to a dialogue with Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today - which they described as an opportunity to listen to the Prime Minister first-hand.

Some 4,000 undergraduates attended the closed-door dialogue.

The Prime Minister addressed a host of issues like racial polarisation in universities, scholarships, university quota system, corruption, politics and economy.

Addressing the multi-racial gathering at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, he explained why he "stayed away" from the campus in recent years.

Students interviewed after the three-hour session said the meeting was enlightening and provided respective student leaders with a forum to air their grievances and ask questions.

Enthusiastic students, some waving flags, banners and posters of Dr Mahathir, lined up to greet the Prime Minister when he arrived with his wife Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali for the dialogue.

Chanting "Hidup Mahathir", the students, selected to take part in the dialogue by their respective universities, jostled with each other to get a closer look at Dr Mahathir, and to shake his hand in greeting.

Later, the Prime Minister was "ambushed" by students eager for his autograph.

Also present were Education Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak and his wife Datin Seri Rosmah Mansor and UKM vice-chancellor Professor Datuk Dr Anuwar Ali.

Today's dialogue is yet another step towards bridging the gap between the country's leaders and university students.

Previously, dialogues and special seminars had been organised to enable Cabinet ministers to explain the country's policies and current affairs to the students, and also to instil in them a sense of patriotism.

The participating private universities were Universiti Tenaga Nasional, Universiti Telekom, Universiti Petronas and Universiti Tun Abdul Razak. Those attending were not confined to first year students, but were from all levels of university life.

In his speech preceding the dialogue, Dr Mahathir admitted that he had "stayed away" (jauhkan diri) from universities in recent years but stressed that this happened for a reason.

"It is because I planned to step down from politics and government. Thus, I allowed my successor to get close to universities and also the states as he would replace me.

"But the economic crisis in 1997 required me to postpone my retirement," he said.

He cautioned his audience on the dangers of the country being re-colonised by foreign powers.

Dr Mahathir, who last month met students from Universiti Teknologi Kebangsaan and Universiti Teknologi Mara, said:

"There are those who have tried to re-colonise us but we managed to successfully repel them.

"Will we be able to do the same in future? Whether we can succeed in repelling them will very much depend on the future generation ... all of you here.

"I believe the nation's future generation, like the present generation,

wants the country to be free."

Which was why, he said, it was imperative students possessed a sense of responsibility. "This will ensure that the country will be independent forever."

Dr Mahathir also said it was important to listen to criticisms, admonishments and harsh words, and not merely praise.

"We must listen or else our feet will not be touching the ground. We may think that everything we do is right ... but it might not be so for the country and the people."

He said in any country, leaders would not get support from each person in the populace as there would be those who disagreed with certain things.

"Their disagreement could have arisen out of a lack of understanding. So, when there is a lack of understanding, we will try to explain, like now."

Dr Mahathir said he accepts criticisms but they must be balanced and fair.

Asked at a Press conference later about the dialogue, Dr Mahathir said the warm welcome he got today had dispelled any notion that students were anti-government.

"They are very friendly ... therefore claims that they oppose the government are not true. There are criticisms but perhaps this stems from their high hopes and expectations (of the government).

"I have always believed that not all students are anti-government but because of one bad apple, all the rest of the apples will go bad when they are put together."

On the dialogue, Dr Mahathir said he shared with them his views on various matters including the students' welfare, corruption and the country's political and economic development.

On the role expected of students, he said though they needed to know about the country's politics, they must be patient and should use the opportunity to gain knowledge first.

"After being employed, they can get involved directly or indirectly in politics and in determining ways to administer the country."

On the prospect of having more of such dialogues, Dr Mahathir said they should be held in a more open setting and not under situations where they come with a closed mind and refuse to listen to the views of others.

"It will not only be carried out by me, but other leaders because there seems to be a gap in the information received by students and their understanding of happenings in the country."

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