

PM: We will study why majority declined

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From HARDEV KAUR

TOKYO, Mon: The use of religious issues and sentiments by the Opposition could have contributed to the lower majority for the Barisan Nasional candidate in the Teluk Kemang parliamentary by-election last Saturday.

"I am convinced that this had an impact... we need to study as to why the majority declined," Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad told a Press conference in Tokyo today.

In the by-election BN candidate S. Sothinatham of MIC beat Keadilan's candidate Ruslan Kasim by 5,972 votes. Sothinathan polled 24,500 votes against Ruslan's 18,528 votes.

The Prime Minister said usually the Opposition candidate in the constituency was either a Chinese or Indian from the DAP and thus religious issues could not be utilised.

This time however it was a candidate from Parti Keadilan Nasional and they used religious issues to woo Muslim voters. Among them was whether they wanted a temple or a mosque. Another issue raised by the Opposition was that of pig rearing in Lukut.

Dr Mahathir said even though the Government had taken extraordinary measures to compensate "almost fully", the DAP used the issue and a number of others so that the people would be unhappy with the Government.

Dr Mahathir said this could be overcome and dealt with, especially in a general election which is different from a by-election. During general elections the DAP usually does not give up its seat to Keadilan.

Asked on racial politics, Dr Mahathir said it was certainly not healthy.

But the opposition does not hesitate to use such issues if they want co-operation from the other parties.

They (the DAP) are prepared to hug each other when it suits their purpose and use religious issues when these are deemed necessary for Muslims.

Meanwhile, Dr Mahathir expressed sadness on the death of the Syrian President Hafez Assad, saying that Assad was involved in efforts to end the war between its neighbours.

Dr Mahathir said new links will have to be developed following the death of Assad and this will delay the peace process.

An Arab-Israeli cliché has held that there could be no peace without Israel and that according to some observers, has meant there could be no peace without Assad.

Assad, who ruled Syria for 30 years, died of a heart attack last Saturday in Damascus. He will be succeeded by his son, Mr Bashar al-Assad, a 34-year old ophthalmologist and army colonel. Bashar was nominated to take over by the Baath Party.

Asked on the summit of the two Koreas, Dr Mahathir said: "I think it is good for them to come together as they are the same people".

He pointed out that there would be differences anywhere and even among the South Koreans, as there would be differences of opinion among North Koreans.

"But if you do not sit down, talk and try to find a solution, you are not going to get anywhere."