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Mahathir-English

MASTERING ENGLISH DOES NOT MAKE ONE LESS MALAYSIAN, SAYS DR MAHATHIR

By: E.Sivabalan

KUALA LUMPUR, Dec 28 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said the notion that learning and mastering English makes a person less Malaysian is not true.

Speaking to Bernama in an exclusive interview at the Prime Minister's Department in Putrajaya last Tuesday, he said some people had the wrong impression that to learn English was to be disloyal and to be unpatriotic.

"They think that just being able to speak Malay, makes you a nationalist and that is wrong," he said when asked on the poor standard of English among many Malaysians, especially the Malays.

It was reported that the standard of education, particularly the teaching of English in public schools and universities was not good enough to sustain and prepare the country for the future, especially for the K-economy.

Dr Mahathir said it was unfortunate that some people felt that the English language should be neglected entirely if one was to be called a nationalist.

He said they felt that if person was a Malay nationalist, then he or she should only learn the Malay language.

"The unfortunate thing is of course these people are also English speaking people. But then, the Malay students themselves think that if they learn English, they are not being nationalistic, they are not supporting the Bahasa," he said.

The prime minister said everytime the government emphasised the learning and mastery of English, there were language nationalists who believed that to be a nationalist, one should only speak Malay.

Dr Mahathir said a nationalist was someone who had mastered all the knowledge and the skills and was capable of contesting against the rest of the world.

"That is the true nationalist," he said.

When asked to comment on the lack of English content in the education system due to the switch to Bahasa Malaysia in schools, he that was not the case.

"When we switched to Bahasa Malaysia, we emphasise the importance of the English language right from the word go way back in 1960s when the English schools were changed to national schools. We emphasised the need to master two languages -- Bahasa Malaysia and English," he said.

Asked on the reality that at the school level, the government was producing teachers who were already not good in English, he said the government would either have to get teachers from elsewhere, if necessary, or retrain the teachers in English.

On whether the government had the political will to improve the command of English among the Malays, Dr Mahathir said: "Political will we have. But of course, we will meet with a lot of language nationalists who just want people to speak Malay and have no other knowledge."

Asked if the government was going to ignore these people, he said it had to because the future of the country was at stake.

Dr Mahathir said he admitted that having the ability to speak and explain things in English had served him well during his meetings with world leaders and at world forums.

"So, that is why I feel mastery of English is very important because more and more we have to deal with other countries and we can't go to other countries and speak our own language because nobody is going to learn our language in order to understand us.

"We can speak to perhaps one or two people, but the world is not going to learn Malay in order to understand the Malays," he added.

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