

03/03/2000

PM: Harakah publisher ignored warnings, violated conditions

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KUALA LUMPUR, Thurs. - Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today explained the reason for reducing Harakah's publication frequency from twice weekly to twice a month. He said the action came after the publisher ignored warnings not to sell Harakah to the public.

"(The publisher of) Harakah had been warned over and over again that they were breaking the law because they are supposed to circulate the paper only among their (Pas) members.

"But they have been selling their paper to the public; they have been called and told not to do it but they continued, especially during the (general) election," he told a Press conference after opening the Kankeiren Asean Management seminar.

The Prime Minister was asked whether the Home Ministry's decision to allow Harakah to be published only twice a month was a clampdown on the Opposition.

He said opposition members could not break the law and expect that they "will be privileged and not have any action taken against them." He added that even Barisan Nasional members who broke the law were punished.

Dr Mahathir said stern action was not taken against Harakah prior to the general election as it could have created the impression that the Government was clamping down on the Opposition.

"During the election, if we took action against them, people will think we are trying to suppress opposition views," said Dr Mahathir.

Harakah was yesterday issued a fresh permit by the Home Ministry to publish twice a month. Prior to the expiry of its annual permit on Feb 28, the Pas party organ was published on Mondays and Fridays.

Harakah's publication permit expressly forbids it being sold to non-members.

Home Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi was yesterday quoted as saying that the decision was to standardise the publication frequency of all political party publications, and that no political party publication would be allowed to be published more than twice a month.

Dr Mahathir was also asked why Harakah's permit was not revoked altogether, since the publisher had committed repeated offences by allowing it to be on sale to the public.

He replied: "We are really very gentle people. First we give a warning, and then we give a second warning, and then we give a third warning.

"And then we take gentle action against them. And if they continue to break the law, we will be more severe with them. We are not very crude like some countries in the West."

On whether the move against Harakah could be considered as a punishment, Dr Mahathir said: "You can say it is a punishment, but the fact is that they broke the conditions of their publication permit."

Dr Mahathir was asked whether action could be taken against non-Pas members buying Harakah.

The Prime Minister said the buyers were innocent of any offence.

"They (the buyers) are not doing anything wrong. They're buying something that is sold," he said.

Dr Mahathir added that the onus of ensuring only members bought the publication lay on the permit holders.

"People who know the terms of their publication permits should adhere to the conditions we've given them."

Asked about the Umno elections, Dr Mahathir, who is Umno president, advised members not to engage in mud slinging during the divisional general meetings which began today.

Meanwhile, Deputy Home Minister Datuk Chor Chee Heung told reporters at the Parliament lobby that the Government would take strict action, including revoking or suspending the permit of Harakah, if its Internet edition was published more than twice a month.

He said the new condition for Harakah to be published only twice a month also applied to the Internet edition as long as it used a name similar to that of the printed publication.

However, he added, no action would be taken if what appeared in the Internet did not picture the printed publication or was a "normal" website, like the ones set up by other opposition parties.

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