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Plan to amend polls laws (HL)

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KUALA LUMPUR, Fri. - Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today the Government would look into amending the election laws to prevent sensitive issues from being exploited by candidates.

The review would also look into ways to deal with offences like harassment, intimidation and strong-arm tactics employed by political parties to garner votes.

"Yes, I think there is a need for that because we find that people are breaking the law without any action being taken against them, simply because they have the numbers.

"They think that if thousands or a hundred thousand people break the law, there is nothing that we can do, that is their theory," he said after chairing the Umno supreme council meeting at Menara Dato' Onn. Dr Mahathir, who is Umno president, said if such unhealthy practices - which surfaced in the run-up and on polling day of Wednesday's Lunas by-election - were not checked now, they could threaten the country's peace.

In the closely-contested election, Barisan Nasional MIC candidate S. Anthonysamy was defeated by Parti Keadilan Nasional's Saifuddin Nasution Ismail by 530 votes.

Dr Mahathir was asked to comment on views by Works Minister and MIC president Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu for the election law to be amended to ensure that candidates who used race and religion to woo voters during elections should be automatically disqualified.

"In Lunas, the Opposition employed various dirty tactics to win, including stoning buses ferrying BN workers. They brought thousands of supporters from outside the area, they claimed to have 120,000 on the night the votes were counted.

"This means they brought in outsiders. We do not know whether they are involved in phantom voting."

Dr Mahathir described the action by Opposition supporters in detaining buses ferrying Barisan Nasional supporters and demanding to check the identity cards of the passengers as an act of hooliganism and gangsterism.

"This incident will be studied, with action taken if offences have been committed.

"(But) if we take action, the Government will be labelled as cruel and they will ask for help from their foreign friends and media, and say how oppressive the Government is. But we never resorted to action like demanding other people's ICs."

Dr Mahathir disclosed various tactics employed by the Opposition to win votes, including injecting fear into voters and canvassers.

"If these are the tactics used by the Opposition, I am afraid the country will not be in peace.

"The proper way is for them to tell the people why they should be supported and not by using religious issues like distributing letters purportedly issued by the religious department that Muslims cannot vote for non-Muslims."

Another tactic used, he said, was distributing fake pictures of the BN candidate in a priest's garb, describing it as "the biggest lie".

"In this modern world, we know that pictures can be doctored. One day, I won't be surprised if pictures of me in the nude will surface. This is the lie of a party committed to uphold justice," he said.

When the Opposition campaigned in Chinese areas, banners in Chinese

supporting the use of the Chinese language were displayed but the same was not done in Malay areas.

Dr Mahathir said the council deliberated at length on the defeat. Steps to win back the support of the people in Lunas and other areas had been identified.

He was also asked to comment on supreme council member Datuk Shahrir Abdul Samad's views that Dr Mahathir was partly to blame for the defeat due to his criticism of the Chinese.

"You can say that but my statement has been twisted. My criticism is targeted against a small faction in the Chinese community. My Merdeka day speech was also the same.

"The other Chinese understood this but this group came with their arguments, trying to instil hatred."

Dr Mahathir said he was entitled to make known his views, especially against those who espoused extremism.

"Is this wrong? Take, for example, the Vision Schools aimed at racial integration. Does it mean that the Chinese want to separate their children from the Malays?"

The only problem was with these educational extremists who wanted to apply pressure on the Government with their demands.

"They are a problem to the country ... pressure from friends we can accept but not from extremists."

Asked what could be done to rectify the situation, Dr Mahathir said the MCA and Gerakan would be asked to explain the truth to the grassroots.

On whether it could be said that both parties had failed to convince the Chinese in Lunas, the Prime Minister agreed that they could have failed this time.

"But we will continue with our explanation so that the extremists will not be able to cloud the minds of the Chinese. Here, they can live in peace and make huge profits. Even in the United States, Chinese schools are not permitted."

To a question from an online newspaper reporter on whether the wide display of his posters in Lunas had backfired, Dr Mahathir replied:

"It has not backfired, it's good for us to have my posters. We have won hundreds of other elections with my poster. Before, when Tunku Abdul Rahman was the president, we used his poster and we won. And, we have not lost yet," said Dr Mahathir.

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