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PM on why arrests were made after polls

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KUALA LUMPUR, Tues. - The Government did not arrest two Opposition politicians before the general election as it did not want to be accused of preventing the Opposition from taking part in the polls.

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said every consideration was given to their rights even though action should have been taken earlier.

"But the fact is they broke the law. I don't see why Opposition members who break the law should not face the consequences," the Prime Minister told Japanese newspaper Mainichi Daily News in a recent interview.

He was commenting on last month's arrest of DAP national deputy chairman Karpal Singh and Parti Keadilan Nasional vice-president Marina Yusoff.

Pas' official organ Harakah's editor Zulkifly Sulong and its printer Cheah Lim Thye were also arrested.

Asked if he was responsible for the arrests, he said: "I am not going to say that because I was away I am not responsible.

"Whatever is done by this Government, I am responsible. In the past, we have arrested our own Ministers and even charged and sentenced one to death."

Dr Mahathir was overseas on a two-week vacation cum working trip when Karpal, Marina, Zulkifly and Cheah were arrested on Jan 12. The Prime Minister returned to Malaysia on Feb 1.

"If the Government party has done anything wrong, the court has the power to decide. Umno was once declared illegal by the court.

"So you can see this Government does not spare itself or members of the Government from the due process of the law."

Dr Mahathir explained that if the law were not applied to all, including Opposition members, then there would be no hesitation to break the law.

"The action was taken on specific charges under the laws. They are not detained without trial.

"They are charged in court, under the proper section of the law. It is up to them to defend themselves."

Karpal and Marina have been charged under Section 4(1)(b) of the Sedition Act 1948, which carries a maximum sentence of three years' jail, or a fine of RM5,000, or both for the first offence.

Zulkifly and Cheah were charged under Section 4(1)(c) of the Act, which carries the same maximum sentence.

Keadilan Youth chief Mohamad Ezam Mohd Nor was subsequently also arrested and charged under section 8(1)(i) of the Official Secrets Act, which carries a maximum sentence of seven years' jail, RM10,000 or both.

Dr Mahathir said the recent arrests had not been an attempt to clamp down on the Opposition.

Asked for the reasons behind the arrests, the Prime Minister explained the various charges facing each of the four.

Asked about the Internal Security Act, Dr Mahathir said the law was introduced by the British during colonial rule.

"When we became independent, we still had problems with communist terrorists.... The law is about internal security. So, if anybody threatens to disrupt the peace of this country, they can be detained without trial."

However, Dr Mahathir noted that the ISA had not been used since 1987, except against drug smugglers and counterfeiters.

"No politician has been detained, although I have to admit that (former

Deputy Prime Minister) Datuk Seri Anwar (Ibrahim) was detained for a short while until he was charged in court," he said.

The Prime Minister was also asked about the supreme council's advice that the top two Umno posts should go uncontested in the upcoming party elections in May.

Dr Mahathir said the supreme council had advised the move to prevent a potential split among the party's ranks like what occurred in 1987.

"The candidate who lost took the party to court. The court decided that the party was illegal. After a new party was formed ... the party decided that the post of president and deputy president should not be contested. Everyone agreed because they did not want to have the party split up again."

"Now there is the same possibility. So to save the party from another leadership crisis, the supreme council decided that there should be no contest for the posts of president and deputy president."

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