

PM: One step at a time for merit system to work

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KUALA LUMPUR: A merit system works like medicine and can only be dispensed gradually because an overdose can do more harm than good, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said.

Describing the system a "drastic measure," the Prime Minister added:

"Just like medicine, the dosage must be just right for the kind of illness it is supposed to cure. Otherwise, it will end up killing the patient.

"As such, we have to take it one step at a time to ensure it is effective and to prevent it from creating further harm," he said in response to a question during the premier dialogue on racial tolerance at the Malaysian Institute of Islamic Understanding here yesterday.

Dr Mahathir had earlier delivered a keynote address at the dialogue, which was attended by members of non-governmental organisations, opposition leaders and concerned citizens.

A participant had asked the Prime Minister if the planned meritocracy system for university intake would be extended to other fields; including the appointment of non-

Malays to the highest level in the civil service.

Dr Mahathir said that like bitter medicine, the downside to such a drastic measure was that it might not be well accepted by the people.

"So, we will have to be patient and do things gradually," he said.

To another question, he said the lack of tolerance among Muslims for people of other beliefs could be attributed, in part, to the failure of religious teachers to propagate understanding and explain to their students the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims.

He said many religious teachers were more keen to brainwash their students about alleged cruelties of the Government and how "unIslamic" it was for not adopting Islamic laws.

On education becoming a political issue, Dr Mahathir said that while the Government tried to protect students — from kindergartens to universities — from being made political pawns, such sentiment was not shared by the opposition parties.

"We, in the Barisan National government, make it a point to leave the students alone so that they can concen-

trate on their studies.

"But in the end, they become easy prey for the opposition propaganda," he said.

In his keynote address titled, "Tolerance — the Malaysian Model," the Prime Minister said racial tolerance in Malaysia was something to be proud of although this would never be acknowledged by the Western media.

However, he said there was a small section of society who reject racial tolerance and want to use violence and aggression to gain power.

"Tolerance is for people who are tolerant of others. So, we have to act against these people although we may be charged as an intolerant government," he added.

Dr Mahathir said tolerance level was closely related to the interest of a particular race.

It is easy to express tolerance when the problem does not affect one's country.

He said Europeans who make a lot of noise about human rights and are vocal in rejecting racialism are no more tolerant nor less racialistic than the races they criticised.

"Although their governments try to be tolerant, the people and the government servants, including their police, are not tolerant."