

11/06/2001

`Ensure clean electoral roll' (HL)

Carolyn Hong; Ramlan Said

KUALA LUMPUR, Sun. - Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today said the voters registration process should undergo a complete review to ensure a clean electoral roll is used in elections.

He said one aspect that should be looked into by the Election Commission was the right of the people to vote in constituencies of their choice.

Dr Mahathir said that a lot of people had complained that they could not vote because their names were missing from the electoral roll.

Citing the Lunas by-election as an example, he said many Barisan Nasional supporters failed to cast their votes because they were no longer registered as voters in the constituency.

"There were cases where voters got transferred because they no longer reside in the (Likas) constituency. But at the same time we found thousands of people, especially those from Kelantan, are able to vote back home although they are staying in Kuala Lumpur.

"Why this happened, we do not know. Perhaps, it was unintentional. But we must look into the rights of voters to register in constituencies they prefer."

Dr Mahathir said he had been casting his votes in Titi Gajah in Kedah all this while although he has been residing in Kuala Lumpur for the past 25 years.

The Prime Minister was speaking at the Royal Malaysian Air Force base in Subang on his return from a four-day visit to Japan.

He was asked on the Kota Kinabalu High Court's decision on Friday declaring the March 1999 State election for the Likas constituency as null and void.

In nullifying the election result, Justice Datuk Muhammad Kamil Awang ruled the 1998 electoral roll for the constituency illegal and said phantom voters, including non-citizens, had cast their votes in the poll.

Muhammad Kamil had said it was unthinkable that the Election Commission should shut off the objections without inquiry.

The seat was won by BN candidate and former Chief Minister Datuk Yong Teck Lee.

Dr Mahathir felt many weaknesses related to the electoral roll needed to be corrected to ensure elections would be conducted fairly.

On the High Court's judgment, he said the BN accepted the ruling and would start preparing for the by-election.

He said it was not known yet whether Yong would be fielded as the BN candidate in the by-election.

On the failure of the Election Commission to act on complaints lodged, Dr Mahathir said it was wrong to say that it had not done anything.

"Parties in the Government have also lodged many complaints which are investigated by the commission. They replied. (However) we ourselves are not happy with some of the answers given. We are pursuing the matter further."

On the revelation by the judge that he had been directed to dismiss the petitions filed on the Likas election result, Dr Mahathir said: "I don't understand, certainly I did not give any directive. I don't know, maybe other people are giving directives, maybe some people from some court."

Dr Mahathir said he did not know whether an investigation should be carried out.

"It is a bit difficult when it is between the judiciary and Government. If we kacau (step in), they will say we are interfering ... it is very difficult and sensitive as judges are very concerned about their independence that sometimes they crossed certain limits."

Dr Mahathir said the running of the country would not be smooth if the powers of the legislative, executive and judiciary overlapped.

"If lawmakers want to be judges, it will be difficult. Likewise, it will also be difficult if judges want to take over the role of the legislative ... there will be overlapping (of powers)."

On views that several recent judgments not favouring the Government showed there was a resurgence in judicial independence, Dr Mahathir said: "We would like to see independence but not one where we take over the powers of other people. If independence means opposing the Government, then it is not independence but siding with the Opposition."

On the appointment of a new Umno treasurer to succeed Tun Daim Zainuddin, Dr Mahathir, who is party president, said it would be done as soon as possible.

On whether this would be done before the party's general assembly on June 21, he replied: "As soon as possible but sometimes, it is not that easy."

Dr Mahathir was also asked on the problems faced by MCA over the party's acquisition of Nanyang Press Holdings, to which he replied that all parties had problems, so any differences should be resolved.

On whether the BN would be affected by the squabble, he said: "Yes ... if all parties are bogged down with problems, it will affect."

On his Japan trip, Dr Mahathir said he had the chance to meet with the new Japanese Prime Minister and Finance Minister.

"Generally, ties between Malaysia and Japan are good. There is no policy change although it has a new leadership."

Dr Mahathir said he also visited the NTT Musashino R&D Centre, the first company to build a research centre in Cyberjaya and was now expanding its facilities there.

He said this was proof that foreign companies had confidence in the cyber city.

Meanwhile, Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Dr Rais Yatim said the alleged telephone directive to the judge to strike out the election petition was a matter of great concern and should be investigated.

He said the judge should not keep silent over the incident but should take action, including lodging a police report or initiating contempt proceeding.

He said the judge obviously felt that it was a very serious matter as he had disclosed it in his judgment.

Rais said it was not within his powers to order the police to investigate as it was the judge who should take the first step.

"He can liaise with the public prosecutor. Clearly, he should do something about the matter," he told the New Straits Times.

Asked if action would be taken if a government official was found to be involved, Rais said the Government should do so or else it would have a negative impact on public confidence.