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'Ban will not curtail freedom'

Sajahan Waheed

KUALA LUMPUR, Thurs. - The ban on public ceramah conducted without permit would not curtail freedom in a country that practises democracy, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

In countries like the United States, he said, political parties no longer organised ceramah after a general election.

"However, this is not the case in Malaysia. Our opposition parties are still bent on holding ceramah although the general election was over in 1999.

"What is even more disheartening is that the ceramah turns into a platform for the opposition to spread lies and slander Government leaders.

Dr Mahathir was speaking at a dialogue with about 100 participants of a seminar on racial tolerance organised by the Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia at its building in Jalan Langgak Tunku, off Jalan Duta here.

The participants included politicians from the ruling and opposition parties, academics, students, representatives of non-governmental organisation and religious organisations.

During the dialogue, Pas vice-president Datuk Mustafa Ali stood up to say that there was no need for continued ceramah in the US as the media there practised freedom.

Replying to Mustafa, Dr Mahathir said the foreign media was also biased in their reporting, had their own agenda and often neglected issues in the interest of Islamic countries.

"The truth is there is no democracy there as only the rich can contest in the elections. In Malaysia, any haprak (useless person) can contest.

"We should not be too influenced by what is claimed by the developed nations. They have an agenda and we should not support them. We do not criticise people as and how we like, simply because we are angry with them.

Answering another question from Bernama executive editor Azman Ujang, who asked if the Government would extend the proposed meritocracy system to the appointments of university vice-chancellors, Dr Mahathir said it would be implemented in stages.

"The proposal to apply this concept with student admission into universities is just the first step and it will be carried out in 'right doses' as it was a corrective measure.

"I am a trained medical doctor and I know about a lot of medicine. But, too much of medicine is not good for a patient. It must be given in the right doses."

"We can take the first step, if we succeed, we will continue, but sometimes we must realise that the medicine can be too bitter to swallow although it can cure the ailment."

Dr Mahathir said the rationale behind the proposed introduction of the meritocracy system for Malay student admission into universities was to remind them that if they did not excel in their studies, they would risk being rejected from their university.

"The Government wants to help Bumiputera in the field of education because of their rather poor background although things have changed now.

"We are aware of human mentality. If we pamper them too much, they will not know how to carry themselves."

To a suggestion from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia's Prof Datuk Dr

Sharifah Hapsah Shabudin that educational issues should not be politicised but be regarded as a privileged issue, Dr Mahathir said he agreed with it.

"When I was appointed the Education Minister in 1974, I issued a directive that students should no longer be asked to line up on the roads when a VIP visited the place."

He said he also ordered that photographs of ministers should not be hung in schools.

"This was because I wanted students to concentrate on their studies and not be involved in other matters, but people did not obey my instructions."