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Ling: Our rights are assured

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KUALA LUMPUR, Sat. - Malaysian Chinese have been assured that they will not lose their rights and privileges despite the recent statement by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad that the country is an Islamic state.

MCA president Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik said it was solely a matter of interpretation whether Malaysia was looked upon as an Islamic or secular state.

"Malaysia, under the present constitution, is not a theocratic state and therefore, can also be called a secular state.

"Many things can be called by more than one name ... a rose in English is a rose, in Mandarin it is mei-kwei, in Malay bunga mawar and in Tamil roja but they all mean the same thing.

"As far as Pas has been wanting Umno to say, Malaysia can be described as an Islamic state but it is also correct to describe the country as a secular state.

"As for the Chinese, we would like to reassure them that their rights and privileges as citizens, as enshrined in the constitution for the past 44 years, will not be removed," he added.

Dr Ling, who is also the Transport Minister, was speaking to reporters after chairing a five-hour dialogue between representatives of the Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Sikhism, and a panel of three Islamic experts at Wisma MCA.

The panel, headed by religious adviser to the Prime Minister Tan Sri Dr Abdul Hamid Othman, also comprised Universiti Teknologi Mara's Assistant Vice-Chancellor (Legal Affairs) Prof Dr Shad Saleem Faruqi and Sisters In Islam executive director Zarinah Anwar (see CORRECTION above).

The one-day event was intended to allay fears among non-Muslims in the country following Dr Mahathir's declaration on Sept 28 that Malaysia was an Islamic state.

Dr Ling also reiterated Dr Mahathir's guarantee that other religions can be practised freely in the country.

"As such, Pas should stop posing any more challenges. Dr Mahathir has reassured BN component parties that there will be no change in the present system.

"All races and religions will continue to enjoy the freedom which currently exists."

He said the party would study international conventions on human rights and religious freedom to see how they could reassure the people that the status quo was for real and would not be changed.

"We will also study all the constructive proposals put forward at this dialogue as well as talk to other groups who are keen to have similar discussions with us," Dr Ling said.

"If feasible, suggestions from this dialogue will be passed on to the Government by myself or by Abdul Hamid for further action," he added.