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PM: Time to consolidate (HL)

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KUALA LUMPUR, Mon. - With the controversy over MCA's purchase of Nanyang Press Holdings resolved, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today the task facing the party now was to consolidate itself.

The Prime Minister and Barisan Nasional chairman said he hoped the party would not be divided anymore.

He expressed confidence that MCA president Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik would not exact revenge against those who opposed the party's decision to acquire Nanyang Press, which publishes the Nanyang Siang Pau and China Press dailies.

"The main thing now is for MCA to consolidate. The takeover is for the party to decide, and it has decided on the matter ... regardless whether the majority is big or small," he said, referring to the outcome of yesterday's extraordinary general meeting where 1,176 delegates voted in favour of the deal while 1,019 opposed it.

Dr Mahathir was speaking at a Press conference after opening the 20th Al-Baraka symposium for Islamic economies at the Sheraton Imperial.

The takeover escalated into a controversy when eight senior party leaders, including deputy president Datuk Lim Ah Lek and two vice-presidents, opposed the acquisition.

To a question on the possibility of the Chinese withdrawing their support for Barisan Nasional in the next general election, Dr Mahathir replied the Government had done a lot for the community.

"As I have pointed out, this is the only country in the world which allows Chinese to have their own schools and language. There are no other countries which allow the Chinese so much freedom and liberty as in Malaysia.

"I challenged all these developed countries to show that they are more liberal than us with regard to their Chinese communities. In these countries, the Chinese must speak the language of the countries, not their own language, and some of them have become totally assimilated."

Asked for his opinion of one group controlling all the Chinese dailies, Dr Mahathir said he did not favour such an idea.

"But I think everybody should have a chance to buy shares in newspapers. I do notice that many of these Chinese newspapers are very pro-Opposition, that they are almost run by the Opposition.

"They have columns dedicated to the Opposition, anything good to the Opposition, they will play it up. And I think they do not want to see the Chinese community supporting the Government, so they played up these issues like in Lunas (by-election)."

On whether there was resentment in the Government as some of those opposing the deal included members of the Government, Dr Mahathir said there was no truth to this.

"I don't think so. The takeover is a minor issue to me ... it is an issue of owning or not owning Nanyang, that's all."

On his advice for the two dailies, he said newspapers must always publish the truth and not twist their reports to suit a particular agenda.

"This goes for every newspaper, local and foreign. Report the truth because your readers deserve that. If you start twisting your reports and try to influence your readers, you are not doing your readers a service."

Dr Mahathir said some quarters were trying to show that the Government was anti-Chinese, and to achieve their goals, had turned issues like

Chinese schools and the independence of Chinese dailies into one involving the special rights of the community.

He said these groups always claimed they were representing the views of the community, but how true this was could not be determined.

"What they are trying to do is to get the community to once again oppose the Government and support the DAP. They were very unhappy that in the last election, the community was so strong in their support of the Government that for the first time Lim Kit Siang and Karpal Singh were rejected, both from the (Penang) State Assembly and Parliament."

On the appointments of a Chinese political secretary and Press officer to the Prime Minister, Dr Mahathir said the matter had been finalised and an announcement would be made soon.