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PM: I didn't direct MCA (HL)

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KUALA LUMPUR, Fri. - Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today he had never directed MCA to acquire Nanyang Press Holdings but gave the nod because his opinion was sought.

If the MCA had not approached him on the matter, Dr Mahathir said, he would not have said anything.

"He (MCA president Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik) asked me whether they can buy and I said okay. If he did not ask me, I would not say okay," he said.

Asked why Dr Ling had to approach him, Dr Mahathir said he did not know.

"You can ask him. They are trying somehow or other to link it with me, basically," he said at a Press conference at the end of the second day of the Umno general assembly.

Dr Mahathir said a lot of people approached him, including members of the Press who asked all kinds of questions.

"They ask me, I answer. If they don't ask me, I don't answer," he added.

MCA had, on May 28, acquired 72.35 per cent stake in Nanyang Press through the party's investment arm, Huaren Management Sdn Bhd.

The move met strong opposition from various Chinese associations and guilds, and was also objected to by eight leaders of MCA's 40-member central committee.

To a suggestion yesterday that the greenlight given to acquire Nanyang Press lent credence to claims that it was the Government's intention to acquire the newspapers as they were critical of the Government, Dr Mahathir said:

"Anything that I say will be interpreted by those against me in some way or other to tarnish my image."

He said he had no right to stop anybody from buying whatever they wanted to buy.

He added that there is no law to prevent the MCA from buying into a newspaper.

"Is it only the Opposition that can buy into a newspaper?"

"If the MCA asked me can we buy, my answer is yes. If Gerakan asked me if they could buy a newspaper, my answer is yes ... by all means do. If the PPP (People's Progressive Party) wants to buy a newspaper, they can buy."

"How can I say no-no-no you cannot (buy). When people are saying that Umno has a newspaper, can't MCA have a newspaper?"

He said the DAP has a paper but no one complained and Harakah, which is supposed to be a party newspaper, was being circulated and sold in the country, which was against the law.

"So I don't see why I should tell the MCA no-no-no ... you mustn't buy. How do I know the Chinese community seem to object to a political party buying a Chinese newspaper?" he added.

Asked if the Government was comfortable with the two newspapers under the MCA, he said if other people offered to buy, then they could buy and that there were people who came to ask if they could buy.

"I say yes, you can buy. They were from the Associated Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry ... they came to ask me."

Pressed further if there was any directive for the MCA to buy the Nanyang Press, he said: "No. A directive is when I call the MCA and say now you buy ... that is a directive. Now I am directing you to publish

exactly what I say and not to try and twist it," he said.

When asked about the feuding factions using his statement to influence the extraordinary meeting, he said: "Yesterday you asked me that question. If you had not asked, I would not have answered."

Asked if the statement would influence the outcome of the EGM, he said: "Now you ask me. I am not going to answer."