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Seeking common ground (HL)

Shamsul Akmar; Abdul Razak Ahmad

PUTRAJAYA, Thurs. - Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today the Malay unity talks with Pas was to establish a common ground to protect Malay rights, Islam as the national religion and Bahasa Malaysia as the national language.

Insisting the proposed talks had nothing to do with getting Pas to join Umno or the Barisan Nasional, the Umno president said another aspect which needed to be upheld was the position of Malay Rulers as Constitutional monarchs.

He said certain quarters had been making attempts to challenge the special position of the Malays possibly because they perceived the Malays to be politically split and lacking a common stand.

"With that, they question and challenge the position of the Malays and Islam."

Owing to this, Dr Mahathir said he hoped Umno and Pas would be able to stand together to defend their rights.

He also pointed out that the threats were not coming from BN component parties but "other groups".

"It is a situation in which the position of the Malays are being challenged. We should set aside our political differences and defend our rights.

"However, when our rights are being challenged, the Malays do not respond collectively and instead, react based on party lines. The threat is not to Malay political parties but to the Malays as a whole," the Prime Minister told a Press conference at his office here specifically to explain Umno's stand on the talks.

Dr Mahathir also pointed out that there were attempts to question the position of Islam as the national religion and wanted other religions to be given equal treatment.

"This is against the provisions in the Constitution. As such, all Malays should defend the position of Islam as the official religion.

"However, in this situation, we also find that not all Malays voice equal opposition towards the move to question the status of Islam," he added.

Dr Mahathir, who is also BN chairman, said a common stand would not affect the Opposition's position in the democratic practices of the country.

He said despite having a common stand over the issues of Malay rights and Islam "we will still be up against Pas and (Parti) Keadilan (Nasional) in the political arena.

"However, we hope Pas and other Malay parties, if any, will be with Umno to defend the constitutional provisions on matters I have specified."

Dr Mahathir said it was also not a question of alienating the BN components, requesting Pas to join the BN, disbanding Pas to merge with Umno, or dissolving Umno and creating a new party with Pas to go against non-Malays.

"There is no intention of uniting the Malays to go against other races."

He said Umno would continue its coalition with its BN components as "these parties have accepted the constitutional provisions and have never questioned the special rights of the Malays, the national language and Islam".

All Malays, he added, should also have the same stand and be united, "at

least in these matters, and not in terms of going against the Chinese or Indians".

Asked whether Umno's aims regarding the unity talks were relayed to Pas' technical committee, Dr Mahathir said:

"For me to explain here takes some time, and there could be a misunderstanding if it was relayed to the technical committee. It might be interpreted differently, so it is better that we provide the information."

Dr Mahathir, reiterating his desire to see the meeting realised, said he had hoped to meet Pas president Datuk Fadzil Noor at the mosque during Hari Raya.

"It would have been good if we were seen together, not to combine Pas and Umno, but at least we can talk and pray together."

On whether it would be more feasible for him (Dr Mahathir) to meet with Fadzil before proceeding negotiations at the technical committee stage, Dr Mahathir said he did not reject any possibility.

Dr Mahathir was also asked whether Parti Keadilan Nasional should again be invited to join the unity talks in light of Umno's aim to see common ground among all Malays on their rights.

He said Umno was willing to meet with Keadilan if it was agreeable to it and that it regarded itself as a Malay party.

Prior to this, Keadilan had rejected Umno's invitation to join the talks as the former said it was not a Malay party but a multi-racial one.

Asked whether he would ask Pas to withdraw their pre-conditions to allow the talks to be realised, Dr Mahathir said:

"I am not asking them to withdraw before I meet them... they can place conditions but the important thing is that we meet."

On whether the talks were being proposed because Umno was in a weak position, Dr Mahathir said although there was erosion of support for the party, it was generally still very strong.

Asked on reports saying certain elements within Pas which did not want to see the talks materialise, Dr Mahathir said it was possible, but reactions to the the proposed talks varied both in Pas and Umno.

"I think common sense will prevail."

On Terengganu's legal action against Petronas and the Federal Government regarding the State's special payments, Dr Mahathir said it was their prerogative and that it was up to the courts to decide.

Asked whether he still had high hopes the talks would take place, Dr Mahathir said: "I won't say high hopes, but I still have hope."

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