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Mahathir-Malays

UMNO-PAS MEETING ONLY TO DISCUSS MALAY INTERESTS, SAYS PM

PUTRAJAYA, March 8 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today that matters Umno wish to discuss in its meeting with PAS are those affecting Malay interests like the special rights of the Malays, the position of Islam and the national language, and the status of the Malay Rulers.

He said this was because there were attempts by certain quarters to challenge the interests of the Malays as enshrined in the federal constitution and political parties representing the Malays like Umno and PAS should set aside political differences and defend what were provided for under the constitution.

"My wish to meet is only for the purpose of talking over such matters and it does not affect PAS' struggles and I am certain that PAS also wish to defend them," he told a news conference at the Prime Minister's Department here.

Dr Mahathir said that he was prepared to meet PAS even in an informal discussion.

He said that the proposed meeting between Umno and PAS did not mean that the two parties had intention to confront the other races in the country.

The prime minister said that he had called for a news conference today to prevent confusion which may arose among the people and PAS itself following Umno's action in not disclosing what the party wanted to achieve through the meeting.

He said: "Maybe this has caused confusion among the people and PAS does not know what is wished for by Umno. Therefore, I feel it is better for me to explain so that the people will not be confused over Umno's stand."

Elaborating, he said it was essential that the meeting was held in view of the different response between the two parties on issues raised regarding the interests of the Malays.

"For instance, there are times when the special rights of the Malays are challenged. Our federal constitution has determined these special rights. When questioned, their response differed, according to their parties whereas the threat is against the Malays.

"The Malays should stop placing emphasis on factions or parties and instead defend the interests of their race," he said.

Dr Mahathir said that similar actions must be taken when there were quarters challenging the position of Islam and the national language.

The prime minister said that definitely Umno is opposed to PAS and Keadilan in the political arena but "we believe they will join Umno in defending the provisions (pertaining to the Malays) in the constitution".

Dr Mahathir, who is Umno president, reiterated that Umno had no intention to ask PAS to merge with Umno or to ask the party to join the Barisan Nasional.

Responding to a reporter, he said that the challenge against the position of the Malays posed a danger not only to the Malays but also to the nation.

Commenting on the pre-conditions set by PAS before talks could be held between him and PAS president Datuk Fadzil Noor, Dr Mahathir said: "If we can meet, at least I can make clarifications regarding them".

Asked what action will be taken by Umno if PAS insists on their pre-conditions, he said: "I think with the explanation that the Umno-PAS

meeting only involves specific matters, maybe they will change their stand. I feel that common sense will prevail".

PAS wants Umno to meet three conditions, pertaining to the oil royalty payment to Terengganu, the publication of "Harakah" from twice a month to twice weekly as previously, and Umno's proposal on the ban of the use of the word "Islam" in the name of political parties, before the meeting between the two parties could be held.

Umno has accepted PAS' initial conditions for discussions to include issues pertaining to Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, allegations of abuses in the government administration, and not to confine the talks to the issue of Malay unity.

Dr Mahathir said: "I still have hopes that the meeting will take place".

To another question, he said that support for Umno was still strong even though it had been slightly eroded.

According to him, it was not unusual for political parties to experience ups and downs.

Asked to comment on the filing of a suit by the Terengganu government today against the federal government and the national oil company Petronas over the oil royalty issue, Dr Mahathir said that it was the right of the state government to do so and the law should take its course.

Meanwhile, Umno secretary-general Tan Sri Khalil Yaakob, who heads Umno's technical team on the talks, told reporters that he would inform PAS on the scope of discussions proposed by Umno.

"I will inform them that this is our agenda, these are the matters we wish to discuss. Previously, we mentioned a wider scope, that of Malay unity. Now, the PM has defined what he meant," he said.

Asked when the technical committees of both parties will have their next meeting, he said: "We are in communication now".

The technical committees already met twice, on Feb 8 and 16.

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