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Demonstrations
VIOLENT CULTURE REARING ITS UGLY HEAD

By: E. Sivabalan

KUALA LUMPUR, Jan 1 (Bernama) -- A culture unheard of in Malaysia until 1998 has now reared its ugly head -- violent street demonstrations resulting in the destruction of public property.

Such a culture, which has tarnished the country's image in the eyes of the world, has to a certain extent also affected the tourism industry.

Malaysians have seen television footage of such demonstrations where police personnel had been injured after being pelted with stones, of a police personnel having to fire a shot in the air in order to protect himself from a mob and a vehicle ferrying a local television station crew being set upon.

The latest development was during the Lunas state seat by-election in Kedah on Nov 29 last year when large numbers of opposition party members and supporters prevented about a dozen buses ferrying Barisan Nasional (BN) supporters from entering Lunas.

Analysts felt that if this trend of "taking the law into their own hands" is not put a stop to immediately, respect for the police force will be eroded.

They said there will be anarchy if those entrusted with enforcing the law were no longer respected.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, when asked about the matter after the recording of an interview with Bernama on Tuesday, said: "It is very dangerous if people think they can take the law into their own hands, that there will be no repercussion to whatever they do and they will then become more violent. This is worrying".

He said the opposition, especially PAS, from the beginning has been bent on using force to achieve their goals.

He said PAS tried to frighten the people by claiming that anyone who did not vote for PAS would become an apostate and would go to hell.

"That is the PAS tactic and we know it," said Dr Mahathir who is also the Umno president.

He said Umno and PAS are worlds apart. "Umno's stance is that if we do something likewise there will be a conflict, so it is best that we do not do such things," he said.

"Umno's culture is non-antagonistic, we once had a civilian corps but even then it was frowned upon within Umno itself."

The PAS attitude, on the other hand, was just the opposite.

As such, Dr Mahathir said the culture of violence has been propagated with PAS of the opinion that if their number is large, the police could not take action.

He said police had on several occasions arrested those participating in illegal demonstrations but these people had to be released after they claimed to be at the scene by coincidence.

"As such, they have become bolder. They think that if their number is large, nobody will be able to stop them and they could do anything including assaulting the police and setting police motorcycles on fire.

"I do not think Umno will indulge in such acts as Umno has always been tolerant," said Dr Mahathir.

He said Umno would not indulge in such acts as being in the government, it abided by government directives.

"The government has given a directive to Umno not to hold demonstrations and we abide by that," he said.

The Prime Minister said the opposition, on the other hand, has no such inhibitions.

"They will say arrest us if you dare, what can you do to us, we are ready to go to jail.

"The opposition is of the view that the people will then blame the government as unfair and such. This stance is dangerous," he said.

-- BERNAMA

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