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Dr M: It does not matter if Nik Aziz says he is sorry

KUALA LUMPUR, Mon. - Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today it did not matter if Datuk Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat apologised for suggesting he could not recite the Quran.

Although the Kelantan Menteri Besar had yet to tender a formal apology, Dr Mahathir said he did not mind.

"It doesn't matter. I've developed a thick skin. It's all right. It's part of politics to be run down," the Prime Minister said with a laugh, referring to the Pas spiritual leader's comment at a ceramah near Bachok, Kelantan, on Sept 21.

Nik Aziz later said his remark was a slip of the tongue and he was willing to make a public apology.

Dr Mahathir said he finished learning to read the whole of the Quran when he was 12 after being taught by his mother and a religious teacher.

"I have memorised most of the verses in the Muqqadam (verses commonly used in prayer). Otherwise, how do I pray?" he told the New Straits Times in his office in Parliament House today.

Dr Mahathir said he studied the Quran in English and Bahasa Malaysia and this allowed him to understand the holy text better.

"I know the meaning of the Quran which is more important than mere recital. People can recite it but I take the trouble to go over the Quran again in English and Malay, which is the reason why I can pick whichever verse is relevant."

On Pas' claims that anyone who did not know Arabic was not a good Muslim, Dr Mahathir said knowing the language did not mean one understood the faith.

"There are people who speak Arabic who kill each other, who kill other Muslims. They can spit out verses as if they are the greatest scholars in the world, but what do they do in practice?

"They fight each other. They regard other Muslims as kafir (infidels). They run down other Muslims.

"Can they claim that all Arabic-speaking people are good Muslims? Even the Arabs are looking at Malaysia, at how we run our country as a model of an Islamic state."

Asked how he felt about such personal attacks, Dr Mahathir said with a laugh: "It hurts sometimes."