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Pas ready to grant equal rights if it comes to power

KUALA LUMPUR, Sat. - Pas yesterday said the party was prepared to give equal rights to all races if it came into power.

However, vice-president Dr Hasan Mohd Ali said it would not be able to do this immediately as the Malays were lagging behind the other races in certain areas.

Speaking at the forum "Is Malaysia an Islamic State" organised by the Catholic Asian News, he said Malaysia was not an Islamic state as declared by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad as several basic principles such as justice, equality, freedom of expression and democracy were not adhered to.

"Even our ceramah are now banned. It is clear that the Government has become worried that our religious ceramah would capture the minds of the voters," he said, expressing confidence that Pas would win more seats in the next general election.

Other speakers at the forum were DAP national chairman Lim Kit Siang and Anuar Abdul Razak, a fellow of the Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia.

Anuar earlier argued that Malaysia had all the basic principles of an Islamic state and there was no doubt that it was indeed one.

He said the country was peaceful and productive and most important of all, there was tolerance of other religions.

"We also have the payment of zakat and equal distribution of wealth which are prerequisites for an Islamic state," he said.

The forum was moderated by Dr Patricia Martinez, an academic from Universiti Malaya who specialises in Islam.

Lim, meanwhile, said before any declaration of Malaysia as an Islamic state, there must be a thorough debate on the issue by concerned parties.

He said the declaration by Dr Mahathir was a sudden shift which caught the majority of people unawares.

"We are definitely not an Islamic state," he said, arguing that a series of legal writings showed that Malaysia was a secular state.

He said declaring Malaysia as an Islamic state was a major issue and everyone must be conscious of its consequences.

"This concerns all Malaysians and whether they are ready to abandon 44 years of being a secular state," he said.

Later, during a question and answer session with more than 500 participants, Anuar said any shortcomings in granting places of worship to all races in the country would be rectified soon.

"We will look into any grievances as we strongly believe that freedom to practise one's religion should be available to all," he said.

He also said the Government had decided to confront the Islamic state issue as it could not sit back and let others exploit the issue to their advantage.

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