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`It's an experiment we are trying'

IF the Malays are able to compete effectively and prove themselves, especially in education and the economy, the Government may think of further reducing the protection accorded to them, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said yesterday.

"Obviously, at present, we are trying out some kind of an experiment by withdrawing some of the protection," he said at a Press conference, referring to the recent changes in the education policy. "We want to see whether or not they will be able to withstand the competition."

The Umno president stressed that it was a misconception for the Malays to think that their protection was a privilege and an honour.

He said other strategies might be used to test the competitiveness of Malay entrepreneurs, adding that initially they might be encouraged to actively compete among themselves.

"Once they have learnt to compete internally, then we may want them to venture into bigger things. There are many ways of doing this, we have many ideas," he added.

Asked how Umno members might receive his forthright views, Dr Mahathir said he did not expect all of the more than three million members to have the same opinion or response. What was most important, he said, was for them to understand why such measures were necessary.

"We can convince them. In Malaysia, we have done many extraordinary things, but in the end we achieved success," he said, adding that each time the Government undertook a project, such as the national car or transforming Langkawi into a duty-free zone and promoting tourism, there had been strong opposition.

He said unlike newly independent nations that nationalised foreign holdings, Malaysia went the other way and invited more foreigners to come in.

"Now it is clear that others have begun copying us.

"There is no need for me to mention our actions during the recent financial crisis when we did something the whole world criticised. We had to face not only our people, but the entire world. But in the end, everyone was convinced that what we did is right. We must have faith in ourselves," he added.

On his presidential address, which some delegates had described as "brutal", Dr Mahathir said: "I don't think it is brutal, I tried to be honest. I am only speaking the truth, just exposing what is already known. I was not saying anything new.

"Most people would prefer not to say these things, but I do not have any inhibitions, I say what I feel like saying."

He said the response from some delegates during the debate, like Saifuddin Abdullah from Temerloh, was very positive. Saifuddin, said Dr Mahathir, "reflects the views of the young people to whom the speech was basically addressed".

The New Economic Policy, he said, needed two sides to succeed.

"If the policy is good and the response bad, then it would not produce the desired results and if the policy is bad and the response good, it would also not be a success.

"In our view, the policy is right, but it was the response which after some time stopped being as positive as it should be," said the Prime Minister.

Dr Mahathir said the later years of the NEP had been compromised by "distractions". "There was a feeling of complacency and the Malays felt there should be a safety net all the time," he added.

Asked if he anticipated any backlash from the Malays, Dr Mahathir said there was bound to be good and bad responses.

"I have always said I never think of popularity, I speak the truth. However, I have survived for 21 years, not bad for someone who always sounds nasty," he said.

To a question from a foreign journalist on why businessman Tan Sri Syed Mokhtar al-Bukhary seemed to be given many projects by the Government, Dr Mahathir said: "He is not being given a lot of projects. He is starting his own projects and if the projects are good, the Government has no objections to them. It is his money.

"You don't expect me to give projects to failures, do you?" he asked.

On the upcoming bilateral talks with Singapore, the Prime Minister said they would probably decide on the price of water, which is a major part of the package deal between the two countries.

"I think it is ridiculous to sell water at 30 sen per thousand gallons, when Hong Kong was buying it from China at RM8," he said, adding that this was the figure that Kuala Lumpur was using as comparison.

Asked if the general election would be held soon, Dr Mahathir said: "I will tell you when I have decided."

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