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School system 'hijacked' (HL)

PUTRAJAYA, Wed. - The national school system has been hijacked by obscurantists interested in Islamic practices that emphasise form over substance, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said.

As a result, he added, more importance was placed on things like the banning of shorts and skirts than the desire to see pupils of all races study together.

In an exclusive interview with the New Straits Times and Berita Harian at his office at the Ministry of Finance on Monday, he lamented that even though the system had alienated non-Muslims, some Malays said it was still not Islamic enough, driving them to enrol their children in Islamic schools.

"The idea was to set up a school system that would cater to all races in Malaysia. But we find that the people who run the schools have other ideas," he said, citing as an example the lack of facilities for pupil's own language classes for Chinese and Indian pupils.

Dr Mahathir said Islamic practices had been introduced into the school system to the extent that non-Muslims had been alienated.

"So many Islamic teachers are added.

"For example, before we had no problems with girls wearing skirts and boys wearing shorts, especially for games. Now boys are forbidden from wearing shorts, even for playing games, and even games are discouraged."

The special interview with the NST and BH team, led by NSTP group editor-in-chief Tan Sri Abdullah Ahmad, touched on a broad range of subjects, from economic issues to his plans after October next year.

He also gave rare glimpses and candid replies to questions about his personal life.

Dr Mahathir, who is heading a committee to overhaul the national education system, said it was unfortunate that some Malays themselves rejected the national school system, preferring to go to Islamic schools that were badly staffed with unqualified people.

"They do not learn religion, they learn politics, the politics of a certain party.

"That is why almost everyone who goes to a sekolah agama rakyat comes out hating the Government, simply because that is what is taught in the school.

"They say this Government is not Islamic, and they can make up anything about how the Government is not Islamic," he added.

The Prime Minister reiterated that he was set on retiring despite calls by certain quarters.

"I will not change my mind.

"I have made up my mind and I will step down.

"If I am required to do something, it will certainly not be as a Prime Minister."

He said he would take a little rest and then respond to the situation because "although I plan things, largely I respond to situations".

Asked about his previous and present deputies, Dr Mahathir expressed high regard for Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

"I lost my first deputy because he disagreed with me, my second deputy was lost because somebody else had the ambition to take his place, and then I had my third deputy whom I was all prepared to hand over to in 1998.

"Actually my plan was to step down in 1998 after the Commonwealth Games.

"I thought that was the peak of my achievements.

"Unfortunately, as you know in 1997/8 we had the economic crisis, and I found that my deputy was not able to handle it.

"So I said I must stay on, and then came this problem about my deputy.

"But I think up till now, Pak Lah is doing fine," he added.

Dr Mahathir dismissed suggestions that Umno, wanting to outdo Pas, had become "more Islamic" than Pas.

"I don't think that we are trying to compete with Pas.

"We are trying to correct Pas.

"They have the wrong interpretations of Islam, and it's our duty to show the correct one," said the Umno president.

On the disunity among Muslim countries, Dr Mahathir said the only way for these nations to come together and speak as one was to adhere to the true teachings of Islam.

"Go back to the true religion.

"If only they adhere to the teachings of Islam, we would not have problems.

"They say they can quote the Quran, but what they do is something else."