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`Don't stir up Muslim PM issue'

PUTRAJAYA, Fri. - Deputy Prime Ministry Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak today warned Opposition leader Lim Kit Siang against stirring up the "non-issue" of the Prime Minister being Muslim.

He said it was a long-standing convention that the head of the Barisan Nasional was chosen to lead the Government, as long as the BN won the general election. As Umno was the majority party in BN, the head of government was from that party.

"This has always been the practice and the people have long accepted this. There is no reason for (Lim) to raise this issue now," Najib said.

"I do not know what his aim is in raising the matter. For Malaysians, it is a non-issue and there is no dispute about it."

Najib noted that it was clearly stated in the Federal Constitution that Islam was the official religion of the country, although there was no constitutional provision for the head of the Federal Government being a Muslim.

"It is by convention that it is so. If things are working well, why should we bring it up as an issue?"

Najib was commenting on the issue Lim raised in Parliament during the Supply (Reallocation of Appropriated Expenditure) Bill 2004 debate.

The Opposition Leader had questioned former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's declaration of Malaysia as an Islamic state and the practice of appointing Muslims to head the Federal Government.

Najib earlier met Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer at his office here.

On improving bilateral relations, Najib said Malaysia and Australia would study further investment prospects that would bring mutual benefit.

He said while Malaysia would focus on education and defence, Australia would encourage investment in Malaysia. Australian investment here is currently valued at RM1.04 billion.

To boost economic ties, Najib said Malaysia was also considering signing a free trade agreement with Australia, which had already done so with Singapore and Thailand.

The International Trade and Industry Ministry would study the matter, which was raised by Downer, before taking it to the Cabinet.

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