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Police to decide on rallies

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KUALA LUMPUR, Fri. - Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today the police have the final say on the issuing of permits for public rallies as it involves security.

"If the police feel there is no problem, then they will issue the permits," he said.

Dr Mahathir said while the Government agreed that it was the right of the people to hold public rallies, it had to bear in mind that the country was also susceptible to threats.

He cited the Lunas by-election where supporters of Opposition parties had resorted to violence, including assault, storming the police station, detaining buses and seizing people's identity cards.

"We are not surprised since they can even say that God is a thug (samseng) and we do not believe so," he said.

Dr Mahathir was referring to the announcement by the Election Commission that public rallies would be allowed in general elections.

After chairing the Umno supreme council meeting at the Putra World Trade Centre, Dr Mahathir, who is also the party president, said Umno disagreed with the idea of allowing public rallies as the people were still not mature enough with regard to democratic practices.

"After looking at the Lunas by-election and also in my constituency (Kubang Pasu) where people from Kelantan came and beat up my constituents with sticks, we disagree as people are always in conflict. That is 'gedebah' (Kelantanese slang for hooliganism)," he said, adding that Opposition supporters felt that when they came in big numbers, they could resort to violence.

Elaborating, Dr Mahathir said a governing party like Umno operated according to the advice given by government agencies in matters involving security.

On the perception that public rallies reflected the existence of democracy in elections, Dr Mahathir replied: "There are many interpretations of democracy. In some countries, sleeping naked on the beach as a sign of protest is considered democracy ... if that is democracy then this is not needed.

"In some countries, the Opposition cannot win but in Malaysia we are not like that. We even have the Opposition ruling Kelantan and Terengganu and previously in Sabah and Penang."

On whether it was appropriate for the EC to continue making statements on public rallies, Dr Mahathir said: "I do not know. If we say they (EC) cannot do that, then they will claim they have no independence. They have told Malaysiakini they are being controlled.

"If they could say things to us, how could they say they are not independent?"

Dr Mahathir also said that heads of protem divisions need not necessarily be selected as candidates in the next general election.

"This is my opinion. I cannot determine (candidacies) as someone else will make the decision. Although Pas refuses to believe that I am going to step down, the fact is that when election comes it is the party president who chooses the candidates and I will no longer be the president by then," he said, referring to his deputy, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who will take over as Prime Minister after he resigns next month.

Asked whether this was the last time he was chairing the supreme council

meeting, Dr Mahathir said there would be another meeting next month.

On allegations by Pas leaders that he was not sincere in resigning, Dr Mahathir said the party would only believe what it wanted. "If we show a piece of white paper and they say it is black, it is black (to them)."

Dr Mahathir said the supreme council was satisfied that the Budget 2004 was well-received, including by the Members of Parliament.

On the Peace Malaysia campaign, Dr Mahathir said it would be continued at the Organisation of the Islamic Conference summit to be held in Putrajaya next month.

He said the campaign this time would be on the oppression of the Palestinians and the situation in Iraq to stress that this did not involve the Muslims alone but the violation of human rights.

Dr Mahathir said Umno would also assist MCA to woo more Chinese to join the police force.

On the hudud formulated by Pas for Kelantan and Terengganu, Dr Mahathir said Pas' willingness to amend the law following public complaints showed that the law was formulated for political gain.

Meanwhile, Abdullah said the management committee was compiling names submitted by State Umno liaison committees for selection as protem divisional committee members.

"We do not have a time frame when the process should be completed, it will be done as soon as the new constituencies are gazetted," he added.