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`Chinese way ahead if given subsidies'

Koh Lay Chin

KUALA LUMPUR, Sun. - The Chinese in Malaysia would have been "way ahead by now" if the same subsidies and concessions given to the Malays were given to them, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said.

He said the Government had given these subsidies to the Malays as they had lacked opportunities and funds, and had done everything to ensure they succeeded.

"But unfortunately only a few know how to make use of all these opportunities. The others fail and when they fail they blame the Government," he said on the BBC's Talking Point programme aired tonight on Astro's Channel 93.

He was replying to a comment by Talking Point host Lyse Doucet on his frustrations about the performance of Malays.

Dr Mahathir said the Government would not deny help to Malays who had done well and was ready to help those who made an effort right from the beginning.

Some seven million Malays had shares in the country's biggest companies, he said, but it was a waste of time to give millions to those who did not know how to do business.

He said if Malays did succeed, it did not mean the policy to help them was wrong.

"Would we like to see all the Malays fail? There is not a single Malay millionaire because we think that any Malaysian millionaire must be a crony of the Government. If we have that kind of attitude then of course there will be no Malays, no indigenous people who can succeed at all," he said in reply to a question from a viewer on "improving all Malays" rather than a select and "elite" few.

A viewer fielded another question on the reason for Dr Mahathir being "not very popular with the Malays" on popular chat shows.

Dr Mahathir replied: "Well I don't care whether I am popular with the Malays or not - I'm on my way out anyway. All I need to do is to make sure that the party wins. If I'm not popular and the party wins, then that is okay".

On whether giving special privileges to the Bumiputera was akin to "apartheid in disguise", he said giving privileges was not based solely on their race, but because they were far behind the others in their economic development.

He said this disparity would cause tension within the community and could end up in violence, something Malaysia had seen before.

"In America you have affirmative action - of course you went to the court and said that it is against the constitution. But here every race in Malaysia supports this policy otherwise why do they keep on returning the same Government to power every time?"

To a question by a Malaysian Chinese viewer on feeling like a second class citizen and whether all citizens could be treated equally, Dr Mahathir said despite their privileges, Malays felt they were second class citizens too because they were poor.

"They have to work as drivers for the very rich Chinese. So they feel that they are second class - so both are second class, there's no first class," he said.

Dr Mahathir also answered many questions on Islam and the Muslim community, saying there was an obvious enmity towards Muslims.

He said many non-Muslims felt that Muslims were "terrorists led by a prophet who was a terrorist", and this was compounded by the fact that even the latter were subjected to different interpretations of Islam.

"We seem to emphasise the need for Muslims to be apart from people of other religions. That is why, because of these teachings which I think is wrong, the Muslims seem to be confrontational," he said.

Describing himself as a "fundamentalist in the truest sense", he said he followed the fundamentals of Islam which advocated peace, friendship, brotherhood and tolerance.

However, people had been interpreting and re-interpreting religion to suit their own interests, he said, and preached hatred to get support.

He said this was one of the challenges that Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi would face - "the use of Islam in order to subvert people and to create hatred between Muslims".

To a question on whether Abdullah, as an Islamic scholar, would have an easier time with fundamentalist Muslim groups than he had, Dr Mahathir said: "Maybe".

He also said it was difficult to get 1.3 billion Muslims and all the Muslim countries to unite but expressed hope that the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) could act effectively to unify "a number of them".

"We are not too ambitious. We think that we should have a different strategy which can give us better results," he said.

In the programme, Dr Mahathir also took on questions on the "provocative" statements he had made in the past, such as financier George Soros being responsible for the 1997 financial crisis and saying western values spread sodomy and homosexuality.

He reiterated that he spoke what he thought was the truth, and that he did complain about George Soros, who is a Jew.

"I didn't blame all the Jewish people - I have a lot of Jewish friends. But Soros did this to us and we feel very angry about him. So I say what is true and I say what I think is true also about sodomy and other things," he said, adding that other people may tolerate homosexuality but they had to respect Malaysia's norms, values and laws.