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House bids emotional farewell to Dr Mahathir

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IT was an emotional farewell for Datuk Seri (now Tun) Dr Mahathir Mohamad in Parliament on Thursday.

Members of his administration, backbenchers and opposition members came out in full force as Dr Mahathir, who was then still Prime Minister and Finance Minister, was scheduled to answer queries during the one-hour question time.

Dr Mahathir also tabled the Eighth Malaysia Plan mid-term review.

The public gallery was full as Barisan Nasional leaders, captains of industries and political observers wanted to witness a historic event. Not to mention the presence of the foreign media which expected Dr Mahathir to provide them with a good story.

True to the expectation of the media fraternity, Dr Mahathir, dubbed as the spokesman for poor and developing nations, touched on the subject of democracy.

He said the system although widely practised in many countries should be tailored to suit local conditions and that the West, which has "developed" the democratic practices over the last 200 years still encountered problems.

"Even then, they are not free from the flaws of the system," Dr Mahathir said, adding that democracy could not be equated to religion. He said the West associated the system to individual freedom and rights of minority, thereby denying the rule of the majority.

He said Malaysia accepted the freedom of expression as practised under the system but was well aware that there could be riots if racial sentiments were not checked.

"Democratic values, life and property cannot be protected if there were mobs."

Dr Mahathir, who took about 45 minutes of question time, did not mince his words against the Opposition for using religion and misinterpreting the Quran for their personal gain.

He described Mohd Nasir Che Daud (Pas-Kuala Krai) as singing the tune of Westerners when the opposition member used the term "tyranny of the majority" to criticise the BN Government.

He invited Dr Tan Seng Giaw (DAP-Kepong) to join the BN which made decisions in a rational and harmonious manner.

Although it was fasting month, the 77-year-old Dr Mahathir had the stamina to read out the mid-term review speech for about two hours and fifteen minutes.

At the end of the Press conference and a photography session with MPs, Speaker Tun Mohamed Zahir Ismail and Dewan Negara President Tan Sri Dr Abdul Hamid Pawanteh were there to send off Dr Mahathir.

Zahir said next week Dr Mahathir would be a backbencher and his Kubang Pasu seat would be next to Tun Ghafar Baba (BN-Batu Berendam), a former Deputy Prime Minister.

"We will be making adjustments to seating arrangements because the House will be in session until Nov 11," he said.

Zahir, who has been Speaker from 1982, said Oct 30, 2003, would be well remembered as Dr Mahathir concluded his duty in the House by delivering an important policy speech a day before retiring.

"His speech on democracy and rights of majority was good food for thought," he said.

Deputy Information Minister Senator Datuk Zainuddin Maidin, a former journalist, said events in the past week only indicated that there was a smooth transition of power to Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

Kerk Kim Hock (DAP-Kota Melaka) said although Dr Mahathir had been at the helm for 22 years, it looked as if he had not overstayed his welcome.

"The messages and tributes to him by the rakyat and leaders are a strong indication that he and his leadership will be very much missed," he said.

The House on Wednesday also approved amendments to the Election Offences Act 1954 and Election Act 1958.

During the debate Datuk Mustafa Ali (Pas-Dungun) took a swipe at former Semangat 46 president Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah (BN-Gua Musang) who was in the House then for rejoining Umno.

Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Seri Dr Rais Yatim, during the winding up of the debate retaliated by making a scathing remark against Mustafa.

He said Pas leaders like the late Tan Sri Asri Muda supported Umno and held Government positions when the party joined the BN in 1974.

"Mustafa should not forget his past when he too was a member of the Government administration from 1974 until Pas left the coalition in 1977," he said.

For the record, Mustafa is a former parliamentary secretary to the Ministry of Trade and Industry and later deputy minister of Science, Technology and Environment.