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Mixed reaction to NGOs in polls

KUALA LUMPUR, Sun. - Should non-governmental organisations contest in the general election? The reaction to this has been mixed.

Generally, many NGOs feel they have a role to play and are quite happy playing a non-partisan one in advocating their cause although there are some known to be supporting political parties.

There are also those that are uncomfortable being drawn into the debate because they have not been propagating such an idea. Still when asked, they urged that the logic and rationale of the issue be explored.

The question of whether or not NGOs should contest emerged following a report in Utusan Malaysia recently, quoting Election Commission chairman Datuk Wira Abdul Rashid Abdul Rahman, that they should register with the EC if they wanted to contest in the polls.

Subsequently, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his deputy, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, responded when they were asked for their comments.

Dr Mahathir said the NGOS could contest if they were registered with the EC and if they were not, their members could do so individually.

Abdullah said NGOS and political parties were different entities altogether, adding that NGOS should not have political interests.

Malaysian Trades Union Congress (MTUC) president Senator Zainal Rampak said today that if the NGOs' constitutions allowed for this, then it should not be an issue.

"We have had many NGO members contesting as independents in the past. I think it should be left to the individual concerned," he said.

But Cuepacs president Datuk N. Siva Subramaniam said politics and NGO activities were two different things and should not be mixed.

"NGOs should not get involved in politics as their mandate is to serve their respective organisations."

Siva Subramaniam said perhaps some NGO representatives felt that their popularity and services in their organisations were enough for them to try their hand at politics.

Malaysian Muslim Youth Movement (Abim) president Ahmad Azam Abdul Rahman said any NGO member who wanted to contest in the elections should do so individually.

He said, in Abim, anyone who wanted to do so must quit his or her post in the organisation. "They cannot contest in Abim's name. If they wish to enter politics, they have to join a political party," he said, adding that this applied to most NGOs as well.

Meanwhile, Opposition parties are all for NGOs becoming political.

The DAP does not think that the NGOs should be restricted if they feel that they have a case to champion and that they can achieve it by contesting in an election.

"Let them contest. After all, this is a democratic nation," said its secretary-general Kerk Kim Hock.

Parti Rakyat Malaysia president Dr Syed Husin Ali said the right to contest in an election should be extended to all Malaysian citizens.