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PM: Government will not revoke Harakah's publishing permit

KUALA LUMPUR, Wed. - The permit of Harakah, Pas' official organ, will not be revoked despite having published a cartoon insulting Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

"Such an action will be tantamount to the Government stooping to their level," said the Prime Minister.

He was speaking to reporters after chairing a 90-minute Umno supreme council meeting on the eve of the general assembly.

Asked to comment on calls to the Government from various quarters to revoke its permit, he replied:

"What is there to comment? It shows their level of thinking... we can gauge. So, there is no need for me to say anything more."

Asked if the Government would study revoking the permit considering the strong demand from Umno members and MPs, Dr Mahathir replied:

"What is there to study? People want to draw a pig."

Barisan Nasional MPs had objected to two cartoons.

One depicted a khinzir or pig as the cause of the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome.

The other depicted Dr Mahathir with a snout and connected him with the Sekolah Agama Rakyat.

The issue was raised during a debate at the Youth assembly, where a delegate called for the publication to be banned.

Elaborating on the no-ban decision, Dr Mahathir said the Government felt it could not stoop to the level of Pas. "These people said God was a gangster and used profanities, so it is expected of them to do such things (derogatory cartoons).

"If we criticise them, we will be seen to be like them."

To a suggestion that inaction by the Government would be seen as a sign of weakness and would encourage worse smear campaigns, Dr Mahathir said:

"Let them publish. We will see."

When it was pointed out that this was not the first time Harakah had crossed the line, the Prime Minister said it demonstrated the level of intelligence of the people who supported Pas. "They have to descend to that level."

Asked if he had accepted Pas' apology on the matter, Dr Mahathir said the question did not arise as no one had apologised to him.

When told that an apology had been extended through the newspapers, he remarked: "They used the newspapers ...but we have not received any."

In Kuala Terengganu, Pas acting president Datuk Seri Abdul Hadi acknowledged that Harakah had erred in depicting Dr Mahathir with a pig's snout.

He said he had informed the chief editor of Harakah to be more careful in carrying out his duties.

"It is normal in our lives to make mistakes and overstep our boundaries. It is something that needs to be corrected," he said when asked to comment on the issue.

In Kota Baru, Kelantan Menteri Besar Datuk Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat agreed Harakah's decision to apologise was the proper thing to do.

"It is not nice to touch on personal issues. So, if they have apologised, then it is good."

However, delegates to the Umno general assembly were not satisfied. They said the apology was not sincere.

Umno secretary-general Tan Sri Khalil Yaakob said the general feeling was that the apology was more of an attempt to exploit the controversy.

"In the view of the delegates, the damage had already been done. The apology only served to highlight the matter further," he said.

Khalil, who is also Information Minister, said the apology was insufficient as Harakah did not give an assurance that it would not repeat such a thing again.

He said that as Harakah had run afoul of the authorities on several occasions, it should give a written undertaking to the Home Ministry that it would not continue to do so.

Asked if Umno would demand a written apology from Harakah, Khalil said it was only appropriate for the paper to do so.

"We will see if Harakah runs an apology in its next issue."

A senior Umno official said the apology was, in the words of a Malay idiom, "Seperti melepas batuk di tangga (half-hearted)."