

Mahathir defends gerrymandering in polls
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Former prime minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad has defended the practice of “gerrymandering” by the Election Commission (EC) under the BN-led federal government’s watch as a means to address the urban-rural divide.

“Since the days of the British the urban areas tend to dominate politics and to be better served by the government. To balance this, the poorly serviced rural areas have to be given higher representation in the legislature,” said the former premier in a blog posting today.

The process, he said, is not new, citing what he claimed are similar practices in the United States, where states like New Jersey with less than five million residents have the same number of senators (two per state) as California, a state of more than 40 million souls.

He related that in most democratic countries, leverage is given to “less-developed” constituencies.

Mahathir did not mention that the US Senate, unlike the lower house, is not meant to represent the American people equally, but is structured to give equal representation to all of its 50 states.

While disparity of voters between rural and urban constituencies exists, most countries however impose a limit to this.

In Malaysia, the difference in constituency electorates were limited to 15 percent above or below the average constituency electorate, but this constitutional safeguard has since been removed.

The former Umno president was commenting on recent criticisms that the EC is being unduly influenced and made use of by the BN-led federal government to ensure its win in the polls.

‘Opposition also making use of gov’t authority’

Mahathir also argued that “there is no clear line” on how to label what is abuse of power by the government.

“When a party in power uses government (resources) to implement policies, plans or strategies so as to ensure support by the people, can we say it is abuse of government authority.

“On the other hand, when the opposition loudly proclaims that they would do things which would gain them public support, are they not making use of government authority for their popularity?” he asked.

Mahathir posited that the opposition’s promises of increasing subsidies, providing free education and raising petroleum royalty to producer states is also making use of government authority to win votes.

“Abuse of government authority is not confined only to the ruling party. The opposition is also bent on abusing government authority.”

While admitting that “there may be areas for improving the conduct of Malaysian elections”, Mahathir is adamant that the only reason the opposition lost is that the people chose not to support them, and nothing to do with any abuses.

The former premier has been criticised for being the architect behind what many claimed to be gross gerrymandering in the delineation of electoral districts to allegedly benefit the ruling coalition he once led.

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