

Dr Mahathir 'blames' editors for self-censorship
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Former prime minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad has denied that during his long tenure as prime minister, he had imposed censorship on the mainstream media.

In his 30-minute speech at the Bloggers United Malaysia (BUM) dialogue in Subang Jaya this evening, Mahathir said the media self-censored itself because it tried to 'second guess' what government leaders want.

0980409 According to the 84-year-old politician turned blogger, there were a lot of praises made during his time as prime minister "except for vernacular papers or party organ papers which were quite critical" of him.

"But mainstream media such as New Straits Times or Utusan Malaysia sort of second guessed what kind of things they want to print (about the leaders). Sometimes they were wrong," he said.

He claimed that the situation became worse after he stepped down when the press practised self-censorship more extensively.

He blamed this on former New Straits Times group editor-in-chief Kalimullah Hassan, a known loyalist of Mahathir's successor, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

"He would do this (self-censorship) in whatever you report and it went on very quietly. The press never complained and gave the impression that there was no interference, but there was," argued Mahathir.

According to him, blogging could get around media censorship because "government control (of the Internet) is just impossible".

Although the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) promised not to censor the Internet, Mahathir said a simple code of ethics should be agreed by the bloggers in "sticking to the facts".

The former premier argued that blogging could eventually displace the traditional media and other electronic media completely.

With the number of bloggers growing everyday, Mahathir noted that it would be very frustrating for the government of the day to "play hide and seek" with them when it comes to censorship.

"Because there is nothing to stop him (the blogger) from setting up another blog... the only thing I'm glad is that I'm no longer the PM (to take care of this) so to the government of the day, I wish them luck," he quipped.

106 people arrested under ISA

Mahathir had been accused of imposing self-censorship on the media in his two decades as

prime minister, especially during the infamous Operasi Lalang in 1987 when the police cracked down on opposition leaders and social activists.

The operation saw the arrest of 106 persons under the Internal Security Act (ISA) and the revocation of the publishing licences of three dailies - The Star, Sin Chew Jit Poh and Watan.

However, said Mahathir, he had nothing to do with it as they never stopped the papers from saying "nasty things" about him.

"There were accusations thrown at me, saying that I was worse during my time. But I would like to say that newspaper editors are very sensitive people especially those in mainstream media.

"They self-censor because they believed I would not like (what they report) and that I would object - that was all. Other papers said nasty things about me but I never stopped them," said Mahathir.

He further justified the ISA crackdown because "the situation was moving towards (racial riots of May 13) 1969".

"It was increasing to a point that Umno wanted to have 500,000 people to show their strength and I thought it would escalate, that was why we had to take action," he said.

'Treated something like a pariah'

Moreover, Mahathir apparently laid the blame on those in charge of security - the police.

"If I had told them not to, they would soon feel that I was not very supportive. The police have the guns and the power, and we don't. When managing people with guns, you have to be very careful," he said.

At a press conference later, Mahathir also expressed his disappointment towards the mainstream papers and that he himself has "stopped reading the New Straits Times".

To back his claims that the media have been practising self-censorship, he said he was "gagged by the media completely during his successor's tenure, that of Abdullah Ahmad Badawi".

The owner of a million-hit blog called Chedet, Mahathir said that he was "treated something like a pariah" as he was cut off completely by members of government even though some of them were appointed by him.

In his speech earlier, Mahathir recollected the events which led him to take up blogging exactly a year ago.

"I had at least 14 invitations from Umno members to give a talk but these people were later told to withdraw their invitations, which they did.

"So I was cut off from being able to give my views even to members of my own party," he said.

'I was cut off from the press'

Mahathir also put the blame on Abdullah for "erasing the existence of the previous PM who had appointed him" instead of being "slightly grateful to his predecessor".

"But strangely, the moment the new PM took over, he seemed to think that he needed to erase the existence of the previous PM.

"Soon after that, I was cut off from the press... reporters were not allowed to interview me... and they were not allowed to print anything I said," said Mahathir.

Gagging a politician from talking is not a good idea, added Mahathir, because "we politicians like to talk".

"You can kill a politician by preventing him from talking... I have a big mouth so I use it quite often," said Mahathir to the laughter from the 200-strong crowd.

He said it was not until 2008 - four years after he stepped down - that he had to resort to blogging.

Mahathir revealed he had trepidation taking up blogging as he thought he might not be able to handle criticism.

"I was afraid that I couldn't handle some nasty comments thrown at me and scared that I could not reply to all of them... it is a torture. I hesitated for quite a long time until I (started to) blog," said Mahathir.

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