

Nazri: Criticise, but don't undermine Government

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KUALALUMPUR: Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's repeated admonition of the Government and his action in writing an open letter to Members of Parliament and politicians on the matter is an attempt to undermine the present administration, Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Seri Mohamed Nazri Abdul Aziz told the Dewan Rakyat.

Calling on the former prime minister to keep his word not to interfere after he retired from the Government, Nazri said it was all right not to agree with the Government.

"But when he repeatedly attacked us openly, it seems that Tun is trying to undermine the Government."

He said 21 of the 32 ministers in the Cabinet were appointed by Dr Mahathir when he was Prime Minister.

"The Cabinet is made up of 32 people who gave their views before a decision was made. And when Tun says the

country is half-past-six with no guts, his statement is aimed at all Cabinet members.

"I don't think he meant what he said as this would raise more questions. I don't think he is half-past-six with no guts," he said while replying to points raised by MPs during the debate on the Supplementary Supply (2005) Bill 2006.

Several backbenchers had earlier called on the Government to make its position clear on the criticisms by Dr Mahathir over the decision to scrap the bridge project to replace the Causeway across the Johor Strait.

"What is the Government's position on Dr Mahathir's attacks? We would like to know if the Prime Minister's Department is going to reply," asked Datuk Rosli Mat Hassan (BN-Dungun).

Agreeing with him was Datuk Mohd Said. Yusof (BN-Jasin).

"This involves all Malaysians. So we want an official statement from the Prime Minister's Department on this

matter. Enough is enough, let us put this matter to rest," said Said.

Datuk Kamaruddin Jaafar (Pas-Tumpat) urged the Government to reply.

"The problem cannot be ended or willed away just like that. It deals with the way we handle our foreign affairs," he said.

Opposition leader Lim Kit Siang suggested a select committee be appointed to get to the bottom of the affair.

Nazri said it was not true that the Government had surrendered its sovereignty by not going ahead with the bridge project.

"We are not building a bridge where both ends are on our side.

"The southern half is in Singapore and we don't have the right to build there if Singapore does not give us permission. So, the question of surrendering our sovereignty does not arise."

On Dr Mahathir's claim that the Cabinet was only interested in selling sand to Singa-

pore, Nazri said:

"It is a wild allegation from a former government leader towards his former colleagues who had been loyal and worked hard for him when he was prime minister.

"It is because we did not want to sell sand that we decided to scrap the bridge project."

Nazri said the current Government was open in all matters though some quarters felt the previous administration did not practise openness.

"Tun Mahathir is entitled to give his views but in a democracy no one can deny the Government's right to respond to his views.

"The Government respects Dr Mahathir as one who has done a lot for the country, but this does not mean he has a blank cheque to criticise without receiving any criticism from anyone who disputes his views."

Nazri said it was on this premise that he was replying and hoped the former prime minister will not be offended.

"I hope Tun will not be offended by my statement. I hope the public will not consider me as being disrespectful and ungrateful to him."

In the Parliament lobby, Nazri said he had no choice but to reply to the queries from members.

"I take full responsibility for my answers," he said.

Asked if the Cabinet would endorse his decision, Nazri said every Cabinet member had little choice but do what he had done and reply the way he had.

"Any Cabinet member will say the same. No member of the Cabinet can run away from this. We will not change the decision not to build the bridge."

On his claim that Dr Mahathir was trying to undermine the Government, Nazri said it was based on what the former prime minister had been saying and doing.

"You can give your criticism. But when you write to the MPs and division chiefs, that is undermining the Government."