

Mahathir: We need an opposition

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Three days before polling day, former prime minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad told voters that the country needs an opposition that can hold up a mirror to the government.

"I believe in an opposition. I have always maintained that this country needs an opposition and they should be critical of the government without which we don't have a mirror to look at our faces. We think that we are very beautiful but it is the opposition that keeps telling us (that may not be true).

"You know the government member (of parliament), sometimes they are 'ahli bodek' (apple polishers). They are always saying 'you're right', and you have no means of assessing whether you are going in the right direction or not."

He told Malaysiakini in an exclusive interview today that it would be a "disaster" if the country "loses its opposition" as in Singapore.

Looking a little frail in his trademark bush jacket since his second heart bypass in September last year, Mahathir gave his prognosis on this Saturday's general elections. He said the government would be able to retain its two-thirds majority but could lose a few seats in Terengganu and Kedah. Mahathir also predicted that the government would win between 70 to 75 percent of Parliament seats on March 8.

In the 2004 general elections, BN won 90 percent of the seats. If Mahathir is correct, then the opposition could win between 55 to 65 seats, which will be a sizable increase from its current tally of 21. Mahathir also did not think the Barisan Nasional coalition would be able to wrest Kelantan state government from Islamic party PAS.

"Kelantan would be a very difficult because although the margin is very small, Kelantanese have got a mind of their own, so to speak. If they are living in KL, they are very supportive of the government but if they are living in Kelantan, the peer pressure is very strong." Mahathir also believed that the opposition would do well in Penang, but not enough to win government, or deny BN its two-thirds majority.

Two clarifications

Mahathir also took the opportunity at the interview held at his Perdana Leadership Foundation office in Putrajaya to clarify that there was no prior agreement in which his handpicked successor would serve only one term as prime minister.

"I want to say this, there was no gentleman's agreement on this but my thinking was that he (Abdullah Ahmad Badawi) should serve for one term and give Najib (Razak) who by then would be much older to succeed him," he said.

The former BN leader who spearheaded BN's victory in five consecutive elections also ticked off the opposition for seeking to capitalise on something which he had said in jest.

In recent weeks, the opposition has been showing a video-clip at their ceramah where Mahathir was depicted to have conceded in a comical tone that he had brutally mistreated his then deputy, Anwar Ibrahim.

“I mean any stupid fool would have seen that it was a sarcastic remark made by me but they (opposition) make use of such things and this convince voters that they are not really knowledgeable about things or they are not very sophisticated in the use of the media,” he said.

Abdullah ‘lied’

Mahathir was also asked to explain why he had publicly accused Abdullah of lying.

“When I left, I made sure that the party, the government and the finances are in good shape. So when I am told that (my) projects have been postponed because of no money, it’s definitely not true.

“If I was still the prime minister, I could go on not only with the projects that has already in the pipeline but also with new projects because we had money,” he asserted. When Abdullah came into power in 2003, he stopped a number of mega-projects that was inked under Mahathir’s tenure including the ‘crooked’ bridge to Singapore and the Bakun dam project. Although Mahathir expressed regret for appointing Abdullah as his successor, he refused to comment on the former’s performance.

“It is up to the people to judge. You see, I would be bias. (It) is normal if he wants to leave his mark but the unfortunate thing is that the mark cause some losses for us. That is why I was so critical,” he said.

Mahathir slams Khairy

The Perdana Leadership Foundation chairperson, when quizzed about the possibility of Abdullah’s son-in-law Khairy Jamaluddin being appointed minister after the elections, did not mince his words in criticising the ambitious deputy Umno Youth chief. He said Khairy should not seek protection from his father-in-law.

“He (Khairy) has said that ‘I can do these things because I get protection from my father-in-law’. Nobody should ever say that. Do the right thing - you don’t ask for protection from your father-in-law,” he asserted. Asked for his message to voters on Saturday, he urged them to vote wisely.

“Vote sensitively. Vote not only with party loyalty concerns but also vote in order to have good people setting up a good government.”

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