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Dr M: All races enjoy special privileges

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KUALA LUMPUR: Constitutional special privileges are enjoyed by all Malaysians, not just Malays, former prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad said yesterday.

He said the Constitution gave equal protection to all Malaysians, regardless of race or religion, by allowing them to retain their cultural languages, values and beliefs.

"The Constitution is balanced. For example, yes, it recognises Islam as the official religion, but it also protects the rights of non-Muslims to worship other religions freely."

He said Malaysians still identified themselves by their roots — "Chinese Malaysian" or "Indian Malaysian" — which reflected their freedom in preserving their cultural identity.

"This is a right not given to people in other countries. In Indonesia, for instance, the Chinese don't call themselves Chinese Indonesians, they are Indonesians and they speak Bahasa Indonesia.

"But here, non-Malays are allowed to keep their identity, language and schools.

"These are special privileges, too," Dr Mahathir said after delivering a speech on "The feasibility of a two-party system" at Universiti Malaya here.

He was speaking in response to a question from the audience on the concept of a "Malaysian Malaysia", as espoused by DAP.

Dr Mahathir said the concept was introduced by Singapore's People's Action Party in 1964, as a way of accusing Malaysia of practising inequality, where Malays were held in higher status than other races.

"But the basis (of that argument) is

wrong. The idea of special privileges is not new. It applies to everyone, including Chinese and Indian Malaysians."

He also argued that it would not be possible to abolish special rights of Malays without abolishing the rights of others.

"If you want to abolish the privileges of one race, then you would have to do away with the privileges of others as well. Of course, none of the races would want this."

Dr Mahathir also hit out at opposition leader Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, after the latter appeared to reverse his opinion on whether the Lynas Advanced Materials Plant in Gebeng, Kuantan should remain.

He said Anwar was using the issue for political purposes, despite a lack of evidence that rare earth processing posed a public safety threat.

"(Anwar) makes everything into a political issue.

"There has never been any evidence of harmful radiation (released by Lynas) nor is there any real reason to show that we shouldn't embark on rare earth processing, given that it takes place in countries such as China and the United States.

"No one in those countries have protested against such plants."

Earlier, Dr Mahathir said two-party political systems could lead to instability in instances where the ruling party won by a small majority, which would encourage party-switching.

He said politicians who switched parties after a general election should be required to relieve themselves of any elected posts and re-contest the seat instead.