

Malaysia reforms could spark unrest: Mahathir

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KUALA LUMPUR - Influential former strongman Mahathir Mohamad has thrown his weight behind a Malaysian conservative pushback against growing calls for change, saying reform could lift the lid on ethnic tensions.

In an interview, the 86-year-old authoritarian icon expressed wariness over liberalising moves by Prime Minister Najib Razak and suggested authorities were too soft on a rising movement demanding free and fair elections.

"We need a government that is firm. It should be fair. It should be firm," Mahathir said in his futuristic 86th-floor office in the crown of the sky-scraping Petronas Towers high above the capital Kuala Lumpur.

His comments come after police used tear gas and water cannon in April 28 clashes with protesters demanding changes to an electoral system they view as biased.

Tens of thousands took part in the march through the capital, rattling the ruling party and triggering a wave of sharp conservative rhetoric against reform proponents.

Najib, who must call elections by early next year, has moved to soften some of the decades-old draconian security controls frequently employed by Mahathir during his 22 years in power.

But Mahathir, who retired in 2003, warned too much freedom risked stirring an ethnic hornet's nest.

"Now that we want to be liberal, what has happened is that now we are more race-conscious than before. Today people are accusing each other of being racist," said Mahathir, looking somewhat frail but his mind still sharp.

About 60 per cent of Malaysia's 28 million people are Muslim ethnic Malays who are assured political supremacy under a system that also grants them preferences in business and education.

Malaysia has sizeable Chinese and Indian minorities, many of whom chafe under the system.

Eyeing minority votes, Najib has promised to look into the relevance of those policies, while the opposition has said they should be abolished.

But Mahathir, who commands great prestige after helping turn Malaysia into a stable and prosperous nation with a mix of pro-development policies and authoritarian controls, warned change could inflame Malays.

"There is more antagonism between races than before there was this liberalisation," he said.

The opposition has dismissed such ruling-party warnings as fear-mongering.

Mahathir also said a Najib campaign to promote racial unity was "not clearly defined."

He added that Najib's pledge late last year that people would no longer be jailed for their political beliefs - part of his moves to relax security controls - opens the door to extremism.

"What happens, of course, is that when you open up things - you become liberal - it is the extremists, the aggressive ones, who project their views," said Mahathir.

"Where there was no problem, now there is a problem."

Seeking to claw back big opposition gains in 2008 polls, Najib is seen to be walking a tightrope between voters seeking change and powerful conservative forces in his Malay-dominated ruling party and the government that it has controlled for 55 years.

Mahathir said allegations of electoral bias were "sheer nonsense," and that majority Malays saw the April reform rally as the government failing "to stop the kind of violence that they (protesters) indulge in."

The clean-elections movement has sparked talk in Malaysia that it could be the leading wedge of an "Arab Spring"-style outburst.

Opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim has evoked that spectre as leverage to push for change, while hardliners cite it as justifying a tough stance against dissent.

But Mahathir dismissed the possibility of Malaysians rising up, noting they enjoy more freedoms and are far more well-off than the Arab masses.

He seemed less sure on whether ruling party forces, entrenched in government since independence in 1957, would easily yield power - an opposition concern - if they lost what is expected to be a close election.

"Well, we should hope for a smooth transition, but if (the ruling coalition) doesn't do well, it is not a good thing for this country," he said.

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