

Dr M says not responsible for illegal award of citizenships
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By Clara Chooi

KUALA LUMPUR, Feb 6 — Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad today absolved himself of responsibility over claims that citizenships were illegally given out to foreigners in Sabah in the past, maintaining that the “order” was merely for those who qualified.

The former prime minister, who has been repeatedly blamed for spearheading “Projek IC”, a 1980s initiative where Malaysian citizenships were allegedly exchanged for votes for the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN), repeated that the pre-requisite for such an award was for an individual to reside in Malaysia for a certain duration of time, among other requirements.

“I agree that we can give citizenships to people who have lived here a certain length of time and who qualifies to become citizens,” he told reporters after a book launch at Universiti Malaya.

But Dr Mahathir **(picture)** then added that while this is true, he could not have had total control over what was actually implemented on the ground during his tenure as prime minister.

“What happened on the ground, I can’t be responsible,” he said. “But the order is given for them to give citizenships to those who qualify.”

Dr Mahathir was responding to allegations by his arch-nemesis Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim over his alleged direct involvement in the issuance of citizenships and voting rights to foreigners in Sabah.

Last month, Dr Mahathir had pointed fingers at Anwar, claiming it was his former deputy who could have been responsible for the illegal exercise and that it may have happened without his knowledge.

“(Anwar) had a hand, but in the IC project, what happens on the ground isn’t always what the directives are all about. What they do on the ground is sometimes different from the instructions that are given,” he had said.

He had also insisted that he has only now heard about the “wrongful things” being done on the ground in Sabah.

But Anwar has denied his own involvement in the “Projek IC” exercise, which witnesses testifying before the ongoing Royal Commission of Inquiry (RCI) have claimed does exist.

In the first week of the RCI hearing, two former National Registration Department (NRD) officials testified that the much talked-about “Projek IC” had existed, and was used to increase the state’s Muslim population.

It was revealed that around 100,000 blue identity cards were issued to immigrants in Sabah in 1993 and these foreigners were allowed also given NRD receipts, which were temporary documents that would allow them to vote during the 1994 state election.

Last week, Special Branch (SB) officer DSP Badaruddin Ismail testified that a former NRD director had sold 16,000 NRD receipts for more than RM1 million, enabling immigrants in Sabah to vote.

But former Sabah Chief Minister Tan Sri Harris Salleh, who administered the state from 1976 to 1985 and was among the first few to take the stand before the RCI, has denied the existence of "Projek IC".

Sabah has nearly a million registered voters — 926,638, to be exact, according to a June report in English-language daily The Star.

Dr Mahathir also dismissed today claims by opposition that revelations in the RCI had vindicated their earlier claims that BN has been awarding these citizenships in exchange for votes.

He pointed out that not all of those who were given citizenships supported BN.

"They are just citizens of Malaysia. They have a right to vote and we never forced them to vote only BN, they vote whomever they like," he said, pointing out that administration of Sabah has changed hands before in the past.

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