

Scrap GST or lose votes, Dr M tells people to warn BN
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By Elizabeth Zachariah

It is up to the public to tell Barisan Nasional (BN) that it may not be re-elected again if more taxes are imposed, says former prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Referring to the goods and services tax (GST) which takes effect next month, Dr Mahathir today said that if the rise in cost of medicines was burdensome to the people, they should let Putrajaya know.

"It is for the people to respond. If this is a burden for them, they can tell the government, 'Please don't add any more taxes'," he said at a press conference in Serdang today.

"If you charge taxes, we will not vote for you anymore."

The outspoken former prime minister was commenting that not all medicines, including essential ones, will be GST-exempt. Only medicines under the National Essential Drug List would be zero-rated.

He said it was inevitable that healthcare costs would go up with the GST as would "everything else".

Medical practitioners had voiced concerns over this previously, with the Federation of Private medical Practitioners' Associations Malaysia saying that the list of drugs under the NEDL was not the complete one for the treatment of all important diseases and their complications.

Another report had said as of today, only 320 medicines were zero-rated, representing 1.3% of the total 43,000 registered medicines.

Dr Mahathir, who is a former doctor, also noted that it was a "miracle" that Putrajaya was able to finance free medication in government hospitals, given that costs have escalated from when he was practising.

"When I was prime minister, we were worried about how to finance the free medicine that we were giving to Malaysians.

"During the British time when I was still practising, it was 1 cent per bottle of cough mixture. So the government wasn't spending too much money. But costs of medicine have gone up.

"How the government can still sustain this free medical treatment is something that is almost a miracle."

However, in his usual caustic manner, Dr Mahathir said although there were

suggestions to introduce an insurance system then, the idea never took off as "Malaysians did not like to pay for anything".

"There were various suggestions that we should have health insurance. But Malaysians do not like to pay for anything.

"So long as we don't ask them to pay for their treatments, I think we (the government) are doing well," he said after witnessing the signing of an agreement between Perdana University and University of California, San Diego (UCSD) earlier for the latter's medical and research programme.

In his speech to medical students at the university, Dr Mahathir also noted that people were now rich enough to seek treatment in private hospitals, which "charged any amount they like".

"When I was a private practitioner, I charged only RM3 for treatment and with injection, it was RM5.

"I charged only RM3. Is that very expensive? I wasn't that rich at that time. But I made it somehow.

"Which is why I focused more on politics. Compared with what I was making as a private practitioner, my pay as a prime minister was a big sum. I thought the government was being generous to give that amount to an ex-doctor to do something that I was not trained for," he said, as the crowd burst into laughter.

The former prime minister noted the importance of the collaboration between Perdana University and UCSD, saying that it would contribute much to the development of the nation's healthcare.

"We need to know of other procedures that are carried out in other countries. No matter how much we know of things, there is always something else that we do not know of.

"We cannot claim to know everything. That is why we need to collaborate with others who specialise in other diseases. I am sure it will contribute much to the healthcare of the country."

Dr Mahathir also again highlighted the importance of teaching Science and Mathematics in the English language in schools, noting that this was how the local medical field could keep up with the world.

"I always feel that we have to study science in English although I am a great nationalist who wants to promote the national language.

"But for practical purposes, we have to acquire a sufficient command of English so we can understand the new discoveries, new research papers on medicine, which will not come in our national language but in English."

In 2003, Dr Mahathir, who was then the prime minister, had reintroduced the teaching of both subjects in English to address the declining proficiency of the language among Malaysian students.

However, the decision was reversed in 2009 by Education Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, six years after Dr Mahathir retired from politics. – March 11, 2015.

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