

**Cops accused of abusing authority by barring debate**  
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**Opposition coalition leaders condemn decision not to issue permit for Mahathir-Nazri debate, saying police not empowered to do so for indoor event in private premises.**

PETALING JAYA: Pakatan Harapan leaders have accused the police of overstepping their authority in barring the debate between former prime minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Umno minister Nazri Aziz scheduled for this Friday.

Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (PPBM) president Muhyiddin Yassin described the move as unreasonable and in violation of the Federal Constitution, as the police do not have the power to block a peaceful gathering from taking place under the Peaceful Assembly Act 2012.

DAP publicity secretary Tony Pua said the act did not entitle the police to assent or disapprove of such a gathering, and did not even require that a police permit be issued.

“The organiser only needs to give notice to the police to hold a gathering and the specific terms can be set by the police to ensure the event goes ahead peacefully,” Muhyiddin said in a statement today.

“By preventing the holding of the debate between Tun Dr Mahathir and Nazri, the police have actually acted beyond the scope of powers granted to them by the Constitution and the laws of the country.

“The action has indirectly obstructed the people’s freedom to voice out and hindered efforts to seek the truth,” the former deputy prime minister said.

Mahathir, who is PPBM chairman, was scheduled to have the debate with the tourism and culture minister on issues like 1MDB, the Bumiputera Malaysia Finance (BMF) scandal and the deposit of RM2.6 billion into Prime Minister Najib Razak’s personal bank accounts.

The debate was originally scheduled for March 25 in Nazri’s parliamentary constituency of Padang Rengas.

After police disallowed the event from being held there, the organiser Kumpulan Media Karangraf, who is also the publisher of Sinar Harian, moved the debate to its headquarters in Shah Alam on April 7.

However a letter from Shah Alam district police chief ACP Shafien Mamat to Karangkrak on April 1 said the permit was cancelled, citing complaints from neighbours in the vicinity.

Mahathir has since rubbished this as an excuse, pointing out that the Karangkrak Complex was in an industrial zone with only factories nearby.

Muhyiddin said Article 10 of the Federal Constitution guaranteed the right of every citizen to gather peacefully and this could only be blocked by the law on grounds of security and public order.

He said the event was to be a closed door affair with the number of people in the audience being restricted.

“No sane person would be able to imagine how a debate between two political leaders in an enclosed and controlled area can become a threat to security,” he said.

Muhyiddin also pointed out that a similar debate had taken place before between former opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim and then Umno information minister Ahmad Shabery Cheek on July 15, 2008 at the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka in Kuala Lumpur.

“That debate discussed the issue of rising fuel prices which happened to be a hot political topic then, and it progressed in a peaceful atmosphere without any threat to security and public order.”

Muhyiddin said a similar atmosphere would be seen in the debate between Mahathir and Nazri if it was allowed to take place.

“Those attending would certainly like to hear the arguments of both parties and not bring about any unrest,” he said.

Meanwhile, Pua, who is the Petaling Jaya Utara MP, said the onus was on the police to facilitate and ensure that the debate took place in a peaceful manner by providing necessary support and security.

“Based on the Peaceful Assembly Act 2012, all that the organiser is required to do under the law is to give a 10-day notice,” he said.

“The Act does not provide for the police to say ‘yay’ or ‘nay’ to an assembly, what more an indoor function at private premises. A police permit is no longer required.”

He noted that Nazri had told reporters that “Malaysia is not a police state” after the original debate on March 25 was denied by the police.

“Hence, we call upon the senior Umno minister to prove that Malaysia is indeed ‘not a police state’ by insisting and proceeding with the debate with Tun Dr Mahathir, regardless of the ruling made by the police,” he said.

He added that the “clear-cut abuse of power” has shown the fear of the Najib Razak-led administration, as the debate would touch on the 1MDB controversy.

Meanwhile, Amanah vice-president Salahuddin Ayub said Umno members should be ashamed as only Nazri was man enough to face Mahathir.

“Unfortunately the manly courage of this one person was also blocked by the police under instruction to save Najib’s status and future,” he said.

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