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Muhammad to stay on in two posts

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FORMER Selangor Menteri Besar Tan Sri Muhammad Taib has announced that he will remain as Umno vice-president and State Assemblyman for Batang Kali.

"I was elected by the people to these posts. Let Umno members decide," Muhammad said yesterday.

He had resigned as Selangor Menteri Besar, state Umno liaison chief, and Barisan Nasional chairman for Selangor and Federal Territory on Saturday.

His resignation from the three posts was announced by Prime Minister and Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who is also BN chairman, after the party's Supreme Council meeting.

Muhammad said he resigned from the Menteri Besar and party posts "so as not to implicate the party and Government".

He is facing charges with failing to declare cash in foreign currencies, equivalent to A\$1.2 million or about RM2.4 million, while leaving Australia for New Zealand at the Brisbane International Airport on December 22 last year.

He also faces an additional charge of making a false declaration pertaining to the cash found in his luggage upon entry into Australia.

"I hope the people will accept my decision in the interests of religion, race and nation," he told a news conference called to officially announce his resignation as Selangor Menteri Besar in Shah Alam.

Muhammad maintained, though, that the two charges brought against him were "technical in nature" and not related to corruption or other offences.

He said he did not feel any guilt over the charges he is facing in Australia.

"Some parties have tried to smear my name by saying that my resignation is due to the fact that I know I am guilty.

"I will fight to defend myself and God willing, I should be able to redeem my integrity," he added.

Muhammad said he had to relinquish his post as Menteri Besar because it is a "public office" and as a responsible Umno leader, he refuses to allow the party and the Government to be linked to the court case, which he described as a "personal matter".

"As a responsible leader, I think we should not link the party with any personal problem because the party has to continue, probably for 100 or 200 years.

"Problematic leaders should step down to solve their personal problems and when they have solved their problems, they can come back to the party... then, it is up to the party members and leaders at the top level whether to take you back.

"But if they don't take you back, better retire," he added.

Muhammad also reiterated that he does not want his case to affect the "noble vision of Dr Mahathir" for Malaysia, to transform it into a developed nation and model for other countries.

He also said he had sought an audience with the Sultan of Selangor on Saturday to inform him of his decision to resign as Menteri Besar.

In addition, Muhammad denied claims made in the Brisbane Courier Mail report which alleged that he owned many properties and was looking to make more purchases.

However, Muhammad said he will leave it to his lawyer to deal with the

matter and look into the next course of action that he can take.

"Let my lawyer determine the course of action. I have instructed my lawyer to deal with the false allegation perpetrated by the Australian (newspaper).

"In the meantime, I also appeal to the local media not to quote unreliable sources in Australian reports as this could be damaging.

"I strongly deny such distorted figures as reported by the Australian press," he said.

To questions on what type of property he was looking for in Australia, Muhammad said: "I will reply this in court. I think this (news conference) is not a court. I think today is not for us to think of resolving my problem... let me solve the problem in Australia by myself."

Asked about his successor, Muhammad said Dr Mahathir will decide on a suitable replacement.

"We, the Selangor and Federal Territory Umno, will support whoever the Prime Minister decides on. Whoever is chosen, we will cooperate and give support. As for me, I will give 100 per cent support... we have to continue to move on," he added.

Asked who will take charge of the Selangor State Government during the transition period, Muhammad said the state administration can proceed normally under the existing State Exco line-up. "However, Exco meetings may not be held and major decisions will have to be postponed," he said.

Asked why he decided to resign rather than just take leave, Muhammad said the person acting in his capacity may not be able to concentrate on his job if he remains as the Menteri Besar.

"Give him a chance to be a full-fledged Menteri Besar with full powers. To me, there is no such thing as a part-time Menteri Besar.

"I am sure the Prime Minister will make a decision soon. Let the Prime Minister decide... I can no longer interfere."

Muhammad's decision to stay as vice-president of the party and a state assemblyman met with mixed reaction.

Former Wanita Umno chief Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz said it would be appropriate if Muhammad steps down from the vice-presidency.

"The Umno vice-presidency is an important post. My opinion is that if you want to save the party's image and safeguard its name, then it is no longer advisable to retain the post," she told reporters in Kuala Lumpur.

"If you don't want the party to be involved, then you must step down from all posts for now. Maybe not resigning... but to take a backseat temporarily if there is such a way."

Rafidah said if Muhammad were to offer his resignation, it could be accepted or rejected by the Supreme Council. "But that is a different story."

It would be best that Muhammad, on his own accord, offer to resign and let the Supreme Council decide, she said.

Foreign Minister Datuk Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, also a vice-president of the party, declined comment. "If that is (Muhammad's) decision, so be it," he said.

On Sunday, Abdullah had said Umno leaders involved in cases that could tarnish the party's name should step down to protect the party's image and reputation even if they were not yet proven guilty by the court. He had described Muhammad's decision to resign from his three posts on Saturday as a move that would help retain the people's confidence in Umno.

The Menteri Besar of Pas-led Kelantan yesterday also described Muhammad's decision on Saturday to resign as a right move.

Datuk Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat said the move showed that Muhammad realised the implications of his court case and did not want the matter to be linked to the state government.

"The decision to quit the post on his own free will is better than resigning after being ordered to do so," he said.

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