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Muhammad-Resignation (News Analysis)

MUHAMMAD'S RESIGNATION A BOOST FOR MALAYSIA'S IMAGE

By: Azman Ujang

KUALA LUMPUR, April 12 (Bernama) -- Although the fate of Tan Sri Muhammad Muhamad Taib has become a question mark since his arrest in Brisbane last December for not declaring to Australian Customs cash worth RM2.4 million found in his baggage, the timing of his resignation as Selangor Menteri Besar today came as a surprise.

The monthly meeting of the Umno Supreme Council here this morning, which by coincidence had on its agenda discussions on the scourge of money politics and abuse of power, was not expected to be the occasion to announce Muhammad's resignation.

But Prime Minister and Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad did just that. And judging by Dr Mahathir's solemn mood at the news conference after the meeting, it was apparent that the subject of Muhammad's resignation was something which the party boss felt very strongly about.

Most members of the Supreme Council -- the party's highest policy-making body -- made their views known during discussions on the agenda, and it is learnt that they spoke with veiled reference to Muhammad's own legal problems in Australia.

But it was Dr Mahathir's own strong feelings on the matter, in the wake of waging an all-out war on money politics that is rearing its ugly head in Umno, that was believed to have sent the message to the embattled Selangor Menteri Besar to quit.

This surprise development came only a day after a Magistrate's Court in Brisbane gave notice of its intention to charge Muhammad not only for failing to declare the money as required by law, but also an additional charge of making a false declaration regarding the cash which was made up of various currencies.

Muhammad, who is to stand trial for three days from Aug 19, faces fines and jail sentence if found guilty of the offence.

This and a recent report in the Brisbane Courier Mail newspaper that Muhammad had amassed properties in Australia in the name of his wife worth millions of ringgit, had overnight made his position virtually untenable.

Dr Mahathir is one of the strongest believers in the notion that one is innocent until proven guilty, but at today's news conference stressed repeatedly the need to uphold the image of Umno, as the dominant party in the ruling Barisan Nasional coalition.

Of course, he also has in mind Malaysia's own image and reputation, which he has vigorously been defending especially in his numerous overseas visits.

That the Prime Minister has set aside partisan politics in the matter became even more obvious on Thursday when he told reporters that the Anti-Corruption Agency (ACA) would be given a free hand to investigate the allegations of corruption and property ownership against Muhammad, who is an Umno vice president.

As he put it: "I don't want to influence the ACA, it's up to the ACA to investigate."

This go-ahead to the ACA from the Prime Minister himself would no doubt make the ACA's job much more straight-forward and in this connection, it has already sent four senior officers to Australia to probe into Muhammad's alleged property acquisitions.

Muhammad himself sat through Dr Mahathir's announcement of his

resignation today looking depressed and sullen.

He is expected to call a news conference on Monday to tell his side of the story that marks the end of his controversy-ridden tenure over 10 years as Mentri Besar.

Opposition leader Lim Kit Siang has been applying pressure in and outside Parliament for Muhammad's resignation to save Malaysia "enormous embarrassment".

"It is now an acid test for the ACA whether it could act effectively and expeditiously to conclude the corruption investigations into the Muhammad case," said Lim in response to news of his resignation today.

Since he became Mentri Besar in August 1986, Muhammad has got himself into more controversies than he perhaps would like to have.

A few years after he became Mentri Besar in August 1986, his hitherto secret marriage to the most glamorous daughter of the Sultan of his own state, Tengku Puteri Zahariah, became the talk of the town.

The marriage reportedly incurred the Sultan's wrath because Muhammad was said to have initially denied to the Sultan that he had married Tengku Zahariah, better known as Ku Yah.

Muhammad, 51, the dashing six-footer, actually married Ku Yah on July 17 1987 or less than a year after he became Mentri Besar.

This put him in a politically "awkward" position of having the Sultan both as the head of state and father-in-law.

This former school teacher not only survived a series of skirmishes with the palace but saw his political fortunes rising in a meteoric fashion. In the meantime, he divorced Ku Yah after four years of stormy marriage with an alimony settlement reportedly running into RM16 million.

In 1993, he won one of the three Umno vice presidential slots in a party poll said to be tainted with allegations of massive use of money to buy delegates' votes.

He was re-elected vice president in last year's party polls which saw Dr Mahathir publicly shedding tears when he made an emotional appeal to delegates to reject candidates who bribed their way to get elected.

The unusually swift action taken to get Muhammad to quit today -- and non-interference with the ACA investigations -- can only be seen as the Prime Minister not mincing words in his war against corruption in high places.

It could only serve to boost Malaysia's international reputation and bound to enhance the confidence especially of the long list of foreign investors already in the country and others who are still waiting in the pipeline.

Not least important is that it sends a very strong signal to people holding public office, particularly politicians, to be accountable and transparent in their actions in line with the oath of office they have solemnly taken. -- BERNAMA

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