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Stern warning to stop running down Malaysia Airlines

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PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said on Thursday night that there appeared to be a campaign to discredit the management of Malaysia Airlines and its executive chairman Tan Sri Tajudin Ramli.

Dr Mahathir, who was asked by a Bernama reporter about a recent newspaper report which alleged that the quality of the airlines' services had dropped, had linked the campaign to parties, whom he said, were hoping to take over the national carrier.

The Prime Minister scoffed at rumours that Tajudin had wanted to sell the airline as he could no longer manage it.

The Star, in reporting Dr Mahathir's statement, headlined "PM: It's a plot - bad Press a campaign to topple MAS chairman". The Sun said: "Anti-MAS Plot - concerted effort to destroy its image, says Mahathir". The Business Times headlined: "Dr M: Stop putting down Malaysia Airlines."

It is interesting to note that Dr Mahathir saw a larger agenda in the reporting of the matter.

To be fair to the local media as a whole, it has to be noted that only one Bahasa Malaysia newspaper was involved in publishing a series of articles highlighting what it claimed to be major problems facing the national carrier.

Other mainstream newspapers like Utusan Malaysia, The Star, Sun, Business Times and New Straits Times were not involved. They did, however, report the replies from Transport Minister Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik and Tajudin.

The Prime Minister could have been prompted to make such a strong reply by the fact that the newspaper concerned appeared to have deliberately downplayed both Dr Ling's and Tajudin's replies to its charges.

In fact, Dr Ling's reply expressing the Government's confidence in Tajudin was not published by the paper until two days later. And when it did, the fact that the Government had expressed confidence in Tajudin was not highlighted.

In contrast, newspapers like The Star, Sun, Utusan Malaysia, Business Times and New Straits Times published Dr Ling's statement on January 23, and in some cases on the front page. The Bahasa Malaysia newspaper concerned did not publish Dr Ling's statement until a day later in page two.

There may and may not be a link between the newspaper's series of damning reports on MAS and the rumours that at least two high-powered businessmen - said to be non-Bumiputeras - are interested to take over control of the airline from Tajudin.

It could be that the newspaper was only doing its job but not too thoroughly.

About the only outside sources mentioned in its first report were "regular passengers on MAS' international flights" and one K.K. Kiew, managing director of an unidentified travel agency.

Other sources quoted by the newspaper were unions and associations representing MAS employees. To support its first report, it used Dr Ling's and Tajudin's replies to further condemn the airlines.

Dr Mahathir's statement confirmed that there are indeed people who are interested in MAS and that they stand to benefit from the negative reports by the Bahasa Malaysia newspaper.

Rumours were rife in the last few months that Tajudin was considering

selling his MAS stake although he had privately and publicly denied them.

This gives credibility to the theory that the rumours are being deliberately spread and kept alive either by the suitors themselves or their agents. Hence whatever reports that may lead to the destabilisation of MAS and its management would benefit these interested parties.

Dr Mahathir's strong statement should serve as a strong warning to these people to lay off or face the risk of having their identities exposed.

As for Tajudin, the MAS management and workers, the renewed vote of confidence from the Government, in particular Dr Mahathir, is a challenge for them to work together to overcome problems and put the national carrier in its rightful place, one where all Malaysians can be proud of.

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