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Mokhtar Hashim urges respect for rule of law

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KUALA LUMPUR, Sun. - Former Culture, Youth and Sports Minister Datuk Mokhtar Hashim, who was given a royal pardon for the murder of a politician in 1983, said everyone should respect the rule of law and not undermine the independence of the judiciary.

He said: "I have never doubted the independence of the judiciary, nor did any politician try to influence the decision of the court when I was on trial."

"Although I was a Cabinet Minister, no one interfered with the trial to make things easier for me," said Mokhtar, who is Negri Sembilan Umno treasurer.

Mokhtar told the New Straits Times in an interview today that when he was on trial, it had never crossed his mind to ask his supporters to stage demonstrations or start rioting.

"In fact, I reminded them through my political secretary not to raise the matter in any forum, including the Umno general assembly."

He said those organising demonstrations against the Government were risking the possibility of others exploiting them and causing riots.

"If this happens, those organising the demonstrations cannot claim that they are not responsible for the riots," he added.

He said to avoid such unruly incidences, the demonstrations should not be held in the first place.

"Worst, they will also be held responsible if the country's political stability and economy are affected."

Mokhtar said many people who took part in the intermittent street demonstrations in the last few weeks in support of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim did so without knowing the full details of his expulsion.

Anwar was sacked as Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister on Sept 2 and expelled from Umno the following day.

Mokhtar said it was the prerogative of the Prime Minister to sack any minister and the decision to expel an Umno member was a matter for the party's supreme council.

"They (Anwar's supporters) should blame the supreme council or the constitution for the action taken against Anwar, not the Prime Minister."

Mokhtar said by organising demonstrations, those involved were guilty of trying to undermine the nation's progress.

"They have no regard for what the country has achieved within such a short period.

"They think the country's success from which they are now benefiting had always been there and was achieved without any effort," he said.

Mokhtar was found guilty by the High Court for the murder of former Negri Sembilan State Assembly Speaker Datuk Taha Talib, a decision upheld by the Federal Court which rejected his appeal.

Mokhtar, then a Cabinet Minister and MP for Tampin with strong grassroots support in Umno, was sentenced to death on March 5, 1983 for committing the offence outside Taha's house at Kampung Seri Asahan, Gemencheh, Negri Sembilan, about 1.30am on April 14, 1982.

His appeal against the death sentence was rejected by the Federal Court on July 23, 1983.

However on March 2, 1984, the death sentence was commuted to life imprisonment by the Pardons Board. He was released from prison eight years later following a royal pardon.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad had on several occasions cited past cases where senior ministers went through the due process of law but none of their supporters had resorted to street demonstrations.

"In fact when the prosecution wanted to transfer the case out of Tampin, I did not object," Mokhtar said.

Mokhtar got his first break in politics when he won the Rembau Parliamentary seat in 1972. From then on, his climb up the political ladder was impressive.

At 32, he became the country's youngest Deputy Minister when he was appointed Deputy Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development in 1974.

This culminated in his appointment as a Minister six years later when he assumed the Culture, Youth and Sports portfolio.

Mokhtar retained his Cabinet post when he was re-elected to Parliament in the 1982 general election.

He was elected an supreme council member in 1978 and retained his position when he got the third highest votes in the party elections in 1981, the same year Dr Mahathir became the Prime Minister.

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