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Anything short of council's endorsement will give the wrong message

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FIVE Umno leaders have been suspended from holding any party posts for six years and another for two party elections after they were found guilty of being involved in money politics.

Their fate was made known last week by the Umno disciplinary board which investigated complaints against them.

The punishment might seem harsh by some but in the wake of Umno's position today, it surely was apt. There is no reason why Umno leaders and members should not support the decisions taken after thorough investigations.

The disciplinary board comprises party veterans. It is chaired by Tengku Ahmad Rithaudeen Ismail. The other members are Tan Sri Ghazali Shafie, Tan Sri Ahmad Razali Mohd Ali, Datuk Nakhaie Ahmad, Tan Sri Kamarul Ariffin, Datuk Zaki Azmi, Tan Sri Hamzah Abu Samah and Tan Sri Samad Idris.

Predictably, someone is already crying foul that he was a victim of the board's injustice.

Gopeng Umno branch chief Mustafa Kamal Nawawi, one of the six, said that he would appeal to the supreme council.

(The others who were suspended are Bagan Serai candidate for deputy chief Zaki Din, Baling division chief and Kedah Executive Councillor Datuk Zainol Md Isa, Gopeng Information chief Mohamad Annuar Baharuddin, Selayang Information chief Rahmat Abdullah and Muar division chief and KFC Holdings (M) Bhd executive deputy chairman Datuk Abdullah Omar.)

How many others will be crying foul, we wonder? And will the others also seek redress with the party's supreme council?

Of course, they can do that because it is their right. The supreme council will undoubtedly look seriously, judiciously and thoroughly into their appeals.

But in so doing, the council will also undoubtedly consider the findings and decision of the board which it appointed to look into the scourge of money politics in the party.

When the council set up the board, it did so at a time when the party leadership, in particular, party president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, had had it with corruption in the party.

Corruption (in terms of money politics), he and many Umno leaders had repeatedly said, was ruining the party and driving away support because people felt only contempt for the party.

Corruption, someone said, is like a ball of snow. Once it starts rolling, it must increase. And in Umno, it has snowballed like nothing leaders and members could imagine. So, it was time to apply the brakes, as it were.

The six leaders who face suspension were among 15 investigated. The other nine were cleared of the allegations against them.

Dr Mahathir, commenting on this, has asked members to bear with him if they felt that he was strict in his action in urging the supreme council to endorse the board's decision.

At a meeting with Perlis Umno leaders and members recently, he said he was expecting appeals and persuasion but the board's decision would be considered final.

Dr Mahathir said the party must be cleaned up so that people would not be "disgusted with us because our leaders are chosen in a corrupt manner".

Party members must know that this entire episode is a serious matter

that cannot be trifled with. Certainly, the decision of the board should not be trifled with.

Once power is given to a body to carry out investigations and make decisions on a matter as serious as corruption, then it is only logical to accept the outcome.

If the decision of the board is so easily disputed, it means that it is so want of credibility and integrity.

It is hoped that credibility and integrity are two qualities that are still familiar to Umno leaders and members.

The fight against money politics should be collective. Party members should take pride in the fact that the party is taking serious steps to curb corruption. A step, no doubt, towards helping the party regain credibility.

Unless this whole episode is a charade and efforts to fight this cancer only window-dressing, then members should do well to regard every speech made - the pleas and persuasion.

The board is investigating the cases before them without fear or favour. They should be allowed to continue to do so.

Now, questions are being asked about others known to have indulged in money politics but who have not been pulled in.

As Dr Mahathir has said, don't think that they have got away. If there is enough evidence, they would also be hauled in.

Umno members should not be intimidated by the power and position of a corrupt leader that they fear the repercussions of making allegations. At the same time, allegations made must be based on substantial evidence and not hearsay.

Not only should those offering bribes be punished. Those who have "benefited" at the receiving end should also be dealt with severely.

Umno members have nothing to lose but their integrity and their future if they continue to allow money politics to reign supreme in a party whose reputation has been severely tarnished.

Indeed, Umno is making an example of the six leaders. And it should. The supreme council is unlikely to overturn the board's verdict. Even reducing the punishment meted out to the six will be telling that it is difficult to take Umno seriously. Certainly, it is not the time to give the wrong message.

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