

Mahaleel's position up to Govt and board, says Dr M

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KUALA LUMPUR: Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad said he supported Proton Holdings Bhd chief executive officer Tan Sri Tengku Mahaleel Tengku Ariff but would allow the Government and the board of directors to decide if he should remain in that position.

Refuting claims that he was exerting his influence on the Government over the affairs of the national carmaker whose chairman resigned early this week, the former Prime Minister said Tengku Mahaleel had made Proton a profitable company.

He was also impressed by Tengku Mahaleel's extensive knowledge of the auto industry, adding: "If he didn't (have that knowledge), I think Proton would have failed by now."

"He has not stolen any money nor has he mismanaged the company," Dr Mahathir, who is Proton Holdings advisor, told reporters at his office at the Perdana Leadership Foundation here yesterday to rebut an *Asian Wall Street Journal* report that he still wielded influence on Malaysia's political and corporate landscape.

According to the report, Dr Mahathir's interference in Proton Holdings' effort to revamp the company had caused its chairman Datuk Abu Hassan Kendut to resign.

Quoting unnamed government officials, the report said Abu Hassan submitted his resignation after Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi overruled a plan by Proton's board of directors to remove Tengku Mahaleel after being pressured by the former premier.

Dr Mahathir said the present situation could be due to disagreements between Tengku Mahaleel and certain board members whom he didn't get along with.

"Many of the Government's decisions were not in accordance with my views or the policy of the previous administration. But I didn't give the Government any headache," he said.

The former Prime Minister said the board of directors and Second Finance Minister Tan Sri Nor Mohamed Yakcop had, on separate occasions, asked his opinion about Tengku Mahaleel.

On both occasions, he said, he had supported Tengku Mahaleel to remain in the job because the Proton CEO had made the national carmaker a profitable and cash-rich company.

He added that Tengku Mahaleel had a good track record and one of his achievements was to build a RM1.8bil plant in Tanjung Malim without government support.

Dr Mahathir also credited Tengku Mahaleel for securing a deal with German carmaker Volkswagen.

At last month's meeting with the entire board, Tengku Mahaleel gave a briefing on Proton's performance but there was no call for his resignation at that meeting, said the former prime minister.

Asked by reporters at the PWTC here on speculations that KLSE executive chairman Datuk Azlan Hashim would be the new Proton chairman, Abdullah said:

"We will confirm that at the board meeting of Khazanah (Proton's main shareholder), I have already said he could be the new chairman."