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## Tapah Umno chief charged with corruption

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IPOH, Wed. - Tapah Umno division chief Datuk Azman Mahalan was charged in the Sessions Court today with corruption, becoming the first politician in the State to face court action over money politics.

The former state executive councillor pleaded not guilty to the two charges, which date back to the 2001 divisional elections.

He was charged with giving RM2,000 and RM5,000 to Mohd Kamal Rabaai, a construction company manager, to induce him not to accept a settlement offer from Pazli Abdullah Sani, who was then a bankrupt.

By doing so, Azman wanted to make sure that Pazli remained a bankrupt, thereby making him ineligible to challenge Azman for the Tapah Umno division chief's post at the divisional elections.

If convicted, Azman, a former teacher, faces a maximum jail term of 20 years and a fine of five times the value of the bribe or RM10,000, whichever is higher.

Umno's top leadership has made it a priority to fight money politics. Former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad used to speak repeatedly on the evils of money politics at Umno general assemblies.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi has stepped up the campaign.

Azman, a four-term Ayer Kuning state assemblyman, did not contest this general election.

Senior Sessions Court judge Ahmad Nasfy Yasin set bail at RM10,000 in one surety and fixed Dec 13-17 for the case to be heard.

He also ordered Azman to surrender his travel documents to the court.

Defence counsel Tun Muhammad Ammar Abd Aziz asked for an early court date, saying that the accused, a prominent public figure, wanted his name cleared quickly.

But deputy public prosecutor Tun Abd Majid Tun Hamzah, head of prosecution at the Attorney-General's Chambers, applied to have the case heard either in December or February next year.

He said it was not possible to have it earlier because he was involved in the graft trials of Tan Sri Eric Chia and Tan Sri Kasitah Gaddam, and the appeal of former Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

The accused was arrested by a team of Anti-Corruption Agency officers at his home today.

When he arrived in court, his head was covered with a shawl. Only when he entered the court-room did he remove it.

Azman was accompanied by his son and daughter. He posted bail.