

Shahrizat's departure: What sacrifice?

MalaysiaKini.com

March 14, 2012

Yap Mun Ching

COMMENT The announced departure of Women and Family Development Minister Shahrizat Abdul Jalil could not have come a moment too soon given the depth and breadth of the Cowgate scandal which has now festered for months.

It brings relief to many who have deplored the slow reaction of enforcement authorities in acting decisively to address the unfolding mess which has focused international spotlight on gross corruption in Malaysia.

In commenting on Shahrizat's 'resignation', Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak disappointingly described the action as one of sacrifice in the interest of the government and the party.

Najib had justified his statement on grounds that there is "no proof so far that she had committed any offence in terms of law".

In the light of the statement by National Feedlot Corporation CEO Wan Shahinur Izmir Salleh, Shahrizat's son, admitting that the company had used funds meant for the development of a cattle business to purchase luxury condominiums, the prime minister, it would seem, has overstepped his attempts at neutrality.

If Shahrizat sacrificed for anything at all, it would be to raise some pertinent questions about the state of governance in Malaysia.

While there has been much focus on how Shahrizat's family purportedly misused a RM250 million government soft loan, much less attention has been given to how the loan was approved in the first place.

Burning questions

In regulations on corporate governance, it is clearly stipulated that family members of the managers of a public listed company are prohibited from benefitting from contracts awarded by the company to avoid a conflict of interest.

How can it be then that governance of billions in taxpayers' money can fail this simple test?

The Australian government's Commonwealth Procurement Guidelines, for instance, calls for agencies to recognise and deal with any conflicts of interest, including perceived conflicts of interest (emphasis added).

Other burning questions arise.

In awarding the contract, has the Agriculture Ministry, as the ministry responsible, checked the background of the NFC to verify whether it has a proven track record of running a cattle business before awarding it a generous RM250 million loan to develop a national beef industry?

What were the terms and conditions governing the issuance of the loan?

If Wan Shahinur (left) has any ground to stand on (a claim disputed by Petaling Jaya Utara MP Tony Pua), how prevalent is this practice of using government loans not for stated national interest purposes but to purchase luxury cars and condominiums?

If a layman can spot these glaring loopholes, what then is the attorney-general doing about it?

Not exactly resigning

Shahrizat's decision to leave office can also hardly be framed as a resignation.

In fact, the minister will be staying on until the expiry of her term as senator, which means that she will only be leaving and not resigning.

By staying until her term expires, she will still be entitled to any pensions and benefits associated with her.

This brings me to my last point, which is that the decision to have Shahrizat in government was not at all the people's intention.

The Wanita Umno chief lost her Lembah Pantai parliamentary seat to opposition MP Nurul Izzah Anwar in 2008 and is therefore not an elected representative of the people.

The responsibility for her being in a position that allowed the scandal to take place should be laid squarely on those who made her minister and cabinet member.

This is a lesson to be borne in mind in the next general election.

It is one thing if a qualified professional is appointed through senatorship to high office but it is another to elevate a politician who was once an elected representative and a minister but subsequently rejected by the people.

If a government cannot choose its leaders well, it should at least listen to the people.

Copyright © 1999-2012 Mkini Dotcom Sdn. Bhd
<http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/191982>