

Najib bows to Shahrizat's wish to stay as Wanita chief

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By Asia Sentinel

Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak is apparently having considerable trouble persuading Shahrizat Abdul Jalil, the minister for women, family and community development and the source of a controversy over alleged misuse of public funds, to quit Umno.

It was announced three weeks ago that Shahrizat, who also serves as the head of Wanita Umno, would step down from the ministry when her term as senator ends on April 8 as a result of what has become known as the Cowgate scandal.

NONEHer husband, Mohamed Salleh Ismail (left), and and their children have been accused of misusing a major portion of a RM250 million soft loan from the government to establish the National Feedlot Corporation, to breed and slaughter cattle under Islamic dietary rules.

Mohamed Salleh Ismail has been charged with criminal breach of trust and violating the Companies Act in relation to allegations of misuse of RM49 million of the funds given to the company.

According to a report by Malaysia's auditor-general, the money was steered into the purchase of things that had nothing to do with the project to slaughter 60,000 cattle annually.

The auditor-general found that the project had never come remotely close to meeting its goals.

Subsequent allegations have involved the purchase of condominiums in Singapore and Kuala Lumpur, travel for the family, purchase of a Mercedes Benz sedan and other items.

Former prime minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad reportedly has repeatedly told party leaders Shahrizat must go, party insiders say, and her main protector, Deputy Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin, is also said to be backing away from supporting her.

"Dr M wants her out and his people have told me so," a source told Asia Sentinel. "So does Muhyiddin, who is distancing himself from her. So she is quite alone."

Shahrizat's successful demands

However, political bloggers in Kuala Lumpur say Shahrizat apparently has demanded successfully that she stay as a member of Parliament, and to keep her job as head of Wanita as well.

"It's common knowledge that the PM doesn't dare sacrifice Shahrizat or hold her accountable or even ask her to quit her Wanita post because he doesn't dare take the chance of a revolt within Wanita Umno so close to the elections," the source said. "Knowing Malaysian and Malay politics, I can see his dilemma."

Shahrizat, the source continued, remains popular with the women's wing of the party "and Wanita Umno are the biggest vote getters for Umno and BN.

"During campaigning, they are very effective, going house-to-house, using the soft touch to win hearts, giving away sarong and gifts and so on. It's easier for a woman to enter an opposition stronghold than for men and that's where Wanita Umno's usefulness is to Umno and BN."

Despite the fallout over the NFC scandal, Najib's administration has tried to distance Shahrizat from the NFC, saying she was wasn't involved with what her husband and children were doing.

"That argument has failed to convince the general public but as far as Wanita Umno - the majority at least - are concerned, they buy this argument and are actually trying to sell this same argument to others," the source continued.

NONE "In any developed democracy, there is also the acceptance of the principles of accountability and integrity. In Malaysia, sadly, we hardly see any public official being accountable for numerous scandals which take place under their watch."

That leaves Najib (right) with a dilemma.

The opposition Pakatan Rakyat, throughout the five months since the scandal broke, has continued to drip out a steady stream of new revelations about the cattle rearing scheme, apparently provided by company and government insiders.

While the prime minister may believe it crucial to keep Wanita Umno mollified, the public perception of the scandal is that Umno leaders passed a project that was basically unneeded - because there were plenty of abattoirs in Malaysia before they put up the RM250 million - and that the funds were passed on to an Umno stalwart who managed to squander them on luxuries and properties that had nothing to do with raising and butchering cattle.

Najib's gamble is thus that Wanita Umno can continue to generate enough votes to push the Barisan Nasional over the top.

"Najib (and Umno) are of course criticised all around for Shahrizat staying as women's head," an opposition figure said in an email.

"Personally, I would prefer to see her remain in both the cabinet and Wanita Umno so that the opposition has a living target to hit at in campaigns."

Snap elections

Snap elections are expected to be called relatively soon, either in May or June according to the conventional wisdom.

Although Najib's personal popularity has risen considerably from its low point after the government cracked down on peaceful marchers demanding electoral reform last July, Umno remains in the doldrums, mired in scandals and perceived as a party of rent-seekers living off government-linked companies and preferential contracts.

NONE "Given the current PM's fear of doing badly in the elections and his fear of antagonising the women's wing, it is not out of character for him to accommodate Shahrizat on what in developed democracies would hold true - that she is innocent until found guilty," the source said.

Indeed, a lawyer close to Umno said, "Shahrizat has resigned as minister and although Mahathir (right) and perhaps many Umno leaders and members would like to see her quit as Wanita Umno head as well, perhaps Najib has made a strategic call that she can stay.

"After all, elections are too near. I don't know about Shahrizat standing for elections but we must remember she is not part of NFC and hasn't been charged with any crime.

"Perhaps if she does get a seat it may just be fair play by Najib, leaving it to voters to decide her fate. And so will Wanita Umno in our own elections after the general election."

- Asia Sentinel

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