

## **Umno leaders latch on to Scorpene broker's claims**

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**By Kim Quek**

COMMENT It is quite a spectacle watching a chorus of Umno ministers scrambling to defend their party boss, following a newspaper report supposedly debunking the commonly-held belief that Altantuya Shaariibuu's murder was irretrievably connected to the corruption scandal in Malaysia's purchase of two Scorpene-class submarines.

NONEBut why should Umno leaders suddenly play up the issue now? Is it to 'cleanse' Umno head Najib Abdul Razak of any stigma, so as to enhance his position in the imminent party election?

Or is it to influence public opinion ahead of the upcoming appellate court hearing of the murder conviction?

Whatever the intention, is it not too risky for Umno to gamble its fortunes on a hitherto unknown name to suddenly appear and make his claims, when the effort could boomerang by opening up Pandora's Box?

The New Straits Times published on July 27 an interview with Jasbir Singh Chahl, a middleman touted as the "architect" of the Scorpene deal.

He vigorously claimed that Altantuya had nothing do with the RM7 billion deal and that the RM500 million so-called commission paid to the go-between company Perimekar Sdn Bhd was not bribery.

With this story as their launch-pad, Umno ministers one after another immediately began their salvos against critics of the issue, accusing them of having "proliferated lies and scandals" to "tarnish the image of our country and our leaders".

They even called for police action against these alleged liars who have supposedly defamed the premier's good name.

They include Ahmad Zahid Hamidi (Home Ministry), and his deputy Wan Junaidi Tuanku Jaafar, Khairy Jamaluddin (Youth and Sports Ministry) and Tengku Adnan Mansor (Federal Territories Ministry).

azlanBut in their haste to defend Najib, who was defence minister at the time of Altantuya's murder and the deal, they seem to have overlooked two major deficits

in Jasbir's story.

First, Jasbir is but a middleman in the wheeler-dealer world of international defence weapon trade with developing countries, where shady dealings under the table are the norm rather than the exception.

So what authority or credibility does he command now to weigh in on such hefty issues as Najib's alleged relationship\* with Altantuya or the corrupt elements of the deal?

There is also no evidence that Jasbir was privy to the intricate details of these events. So, on what basis could these Umno ministers take his words as gospel truth to launch their counter-attacks?

Second, even if Altantuya was not involved in the Scorpene deal as Jasbir claimed (which is not at all certain), it should not detract from the allegations against Najib or about the corruption allegedly committed through Perimekar.

These allegations fall or stand on the merits of facts relating to the two issues individually, revealed through credible public hearings.

How to end the controversy

With regard to Jasbir's claim that the RM500 million paid to Perimekar was not bribery but fees fully deserved and duly earned by the go-between company, let us not forget that Perimekar was merely a travel agency when awarded the contract.

It had barely any staff to carry out the most rudimentary of its obligatory duties, not to mention the highly specialised expertise of submarine "project management and integrated services and coordination works" as claimed by Jasbir.

It was the French submarine manufacturer DCN which had stated: "Perimekar was never more than a travel agency .... their price is inflated and their support function is very vague ... Yes, that company created unfounded wealth for its shareholders."

This is according to documents submitted to the French court which is now investigating allegations of corruption in the Scorpene deal.

There is a simple way to settle the controversy over this corruption scandal: Have this Perimekar deal probed and its accounts in relation to the project audited by an independent panel, and the truth will surely emerge.

Unless Umno leaders have the courage to accept this challenge, they would be well advised to stop their nonsensical witch-hunt against critics of the Scorpene deal.

\*Editor's note: Najib Abdul Razak has repeatedly denied any link to Altantuya. In June, the PM's Office described the allegations as 'malicious, baseless and unfounded'.

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