

Scorpene deal 'broker' out to polish PM's image?

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By Nigel Aw

Since the procurement of two Scorpene-class submarines in 2002, the federal government has reluctantly parried a decade of controversy, scandals and intrigue that followed.

From allegations of corruption to murder, the government's response had often been curt and vague to an issue that wouldn't go away, as NGOs and the opposition sought to keep the issue alive.

jasbir singh chahlSo it is a matter of great curiosity when the entire government-linked media machinery recently featured the the matter prominently, be it on television or newspapers, on what was meant to be a quiet festive season in terms of news.

Two weeks after an interview with Jasbir Chahl Singh, the so-called "architect" of the Scorpene deal, hit newspapers and airwaves, the man was again on television yesterday and in the newspapers today.

The national news agency Bernama had rushed Jasbir's lengthy statement late last night with six updates to the story in less than three hours - a practice out of the ordinary - that was subsequently reproduced by most major newspapers today.

Jasbir insisted that the Scorpene deal was transparent and reiterated that it had nothing to do with Mongolian national Altantuya Shaariibuu who was shot and blown up with C4 explosives by then Najib Abdul Razak's security detail in 2006.

He was then deputy prime minister and defence minister.

Timed with Umno polls

Puzzled that the government machinery is now giving prominence to its own controversy, opposition strategists can only look to the looming Umno party elections to offer an explanation.

PKR strategies director Rafizi Ramli pointed out that Jasbir had been silent for the past decade but has suddenly been in the news for two consecutive weeks.

NONE"Jasbir's timing makes it clear that the whole thing is not in the interest of

truth and justice as he could have addressed the issue much earlier.

"The timing is very suspect. This whole thing appears to be part of an internal Umno campaign to preempt attacks on Najib with regards to the Scorpene controversy," he told Malaysiakini when contacted.

The Scorpene issue had always been a bane to Najib, and at the height of the controversy in 2008, his approval rating as deputy prime minister was worse than then premier Abdullah Ahmad Badawi whose support was already bleeding from failed reforms.

Ultimately, Rafizi said the key to end the decade-long controversy that has plagued Najib, who is also Umno president, is for an open inquiry to establish the facts of the Scorpene deal as well as Altantuya's murder once and for all.

"The fact is this one sided argument from time to time by characters such as Jasbir without the government's willingness to open the books for full scrutiny will not work," he said.

'Tailoring reputation'

PAS vice-president Mahfuz Omar echoed this, stating that the government cannot depend on individuals to clear its name with the help of its media machinery.

"Even though there are indications that the Umno presidency and deputy presidency will not be challenged, I believe he (Najib) wants to make sure that no one will use the controversy to mount a challenge against him," he said.

umno agm egm 151009 najib inspect delegates line up 02Since taking over the premiership, Najib's team has successfully strengthened the premier's popularity, with Najib even becoming the face of an ailing BN to shore up support.

Najib appears to be employing the same strategy in the upcoming party polls when he urged some 150,000 party members who will be voting, to not only choose someone who can be successful in Umno, but also can appeal to the larger population in a general election.

Najib's team in Umno is also expected to ride on his popularity which will likely receive a boost as China president Xi Jinping and US president Barack Obama will visit the country just weeks before the party polls.

Why not just show the figures?

However, the new Scorpene media campaign, whoever is behind it, could potentially be more a bane than a boon for the premier as even the government has preferred to be silent on it.

"The answers we have received from the government about Scorpene in Parliament have always been one liners which are of not much use," said DAP publicity chief Tony Pua who is also Petaling Jaya Utara MP.

Instead of having point men to counter the Scorpene controversy, Pua said the government would do best to quantify all payments involved in the Scorpene deal to show that there was no improprieties.

"Whether it is above board or not, the inquiry in the French court will also determine that," he said in reference to Jasbir's assertion that the deal was transparent.

Human rights group Suaram has filed a case in France against French naval company DCNS over kickbacks allegedly paid out in the Scorpene deal and the probe is still ongoing in Paris.

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