

Dr M: I couldn't sack Samy Vellu
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MIC president S Samy Vellu - or any other scandal-tainted leader of Barisan Nasional's component parties - could not be removed without the ruling coalition suffering a serious internal backlash, said former premier Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

"You ask MIC what they would do if I removed Samy Vellu," said Mahathir when queried why he did not sack his long-time works minister, who was beset by numerous allegations of corruption and abuse of power.

"MIC is scared stiff of Samy Vellu," added Mahathir, who as leader of the dominant Umno party led the BN coalition in his 22-year tenure as prime minister.

"When it comes to the head of a component party, I don't have that much liberty to pick who the head should be or to remove the head from being in the cabinet," he told malaysiakini in an exclusive interview.

"You can see that all the heads of all the component parties are in the cabinet, not because I chose them, but because they were chosen by their party."

Mahathir's admission came after he was repeatedly pressed by malaysiakini editors on his seriousness to battle corruption during the one-hour interview at his Perdana Leadership Foundation office in Putrajaya.

The former premier also claimed that he had done everything in his powers to act against another top leader, International Trade and Industry Minister Rafidah Aziz, who was also embroiled in corruption allegations during his time.

"Action was taken. They - the Attorney-General's Chambers - dropped the charges on her. If the AG dropped charges, that is the AG's decision," Mahathir insisted. "But the fact is that I never stopped any investigation."

Mahathir displayed dexterity in deflecting criticisms against his own administration by re-directing them against his handpicked successor, Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

When asked why Abdullah had not sacked Rafidah, he said: "It's a mystery."

Mahathir claimed that under Rafidah's ministry, "thousands" of approval permits to import cars had been issued to persons whom he alleged to have sold off the permits for a quick buck.

"Remove the minister," he said when asked how such abuses of policies meant to develop bumiputera entrepreneurs can be stopped.

Let varsities be based on merit

Mahathir's scathing remarks are the latest in a year-long battle with Abdullah over the policies of the new government, and allegations of corruption and nepotism.

He lamented the "climate of fear" pervading current politics and the lackluster calibre of government figures as compared to "his time".

"During my time, if they don't contribute, they don't get it (government post)," said Mahathir.

On the question of the affirmative-action New Economic Policy (NEP), Mahathir said it should be done away with gradually, but only "on a case-by-case basis", such as places reserved for bumiputeras in public universities.

"I had myself decided that the (university) quotas for bumiputeras should be done away with and we go on the basis of merit because I thought the time had come and the bumiputeras were not using it," said Mahathir.

"But there are other things which I think you still need some special considerations. Wholesale withdrawal of the NEP, I think, is not a good idea at all," he added.

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