

**Umno rejects sports betting, approval withdrawn**  
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In a dramatic reversal, the Umno supreme council has decided tonight to reject the legalisation of sports betting, dealing a major blow to Prime Minister Najib Razak.

The ruling BN led by Najib had earlier approved the legalisation of sports betting with the licence awarded to Ascot Sports, which is owned by tycoon Vincent Tan of property-to-gaming Berjaya Corporation.

However, Najib announced at a press conference held immediately after the Umno supreme council meeting at 11pm that the approval of the gambling licence has been withdrawn.

He said that the decision by the powerful supreme council - the party's highest decision-making body - was unanimous.

"Since the approval was decided in principle and a survey was carried out, although there were groups who supported as well those who did not support or opposed the decision, it was clear to the government that a majority of the people did not agree that the licence be issued to Ascot Sports.

"As such, I hereby announce that the government has decided that the licence will not be issued," said Najib, who is also Umno president and chaired tonight's supreme council meeting.

Ascot Sports informed of decision

Najib, who is also finance minister, said Ascot Sports has already been informed of the decision, though he declined to indicate when.

"They have been informed, it doesn't matter if it was three hours ago or 10 hours ago. Ascot has been informed and they understand why the government will not issue the licence," he said.

The premier would not be paid any compensation to Ascot Sports as the Finance Ministry has the power to revoke the licence at any time.

Najib reiterated that the government had initially agreed in principle to issue the licence provided that Ascot Sports fulfil several conditions stipulated in the contract.

He nevertheless defended the earlier approval of the licence, saying that it was done with good intentions.

The government had argued that the legalisation of sports betting will help curb illegal gambling activities in the country that runs into billions of ringgit.

"The government intended to control illegal sports betting, which is said to be worth over RM10 billion.

"It also involves other criminal activities, which would have a negative impact on our crime rate and pose a social threat," he said.

Najib stressed that the government has also put in place strict regulations that prohibit Muslims from any involvement with the gambling operations, be it to buy, work in or be a member of the board of directors.

A storm of criticism

However, the decision to legalise sports betting has raised a storm of criticism among Malaysians, especially those who have access to the Internet.

The opposition Pakatan Rakyat has threatened to take the issue to the streets with a mammoth rally next Saturday.

While a number of BN component parties have come out in support of the issuance of the gambling licence, there was growing disenchantment over the issue among a number of those within Umno.

Umno Youth, as well as state Umno in Johor, Kedah and Perak, have this week slammed the move to issue the sports betting licence.

When asked on the support given by BN component parties for the sports betting licence, Najib said they will understand the Umno supreme council's decision.

"I believe the component parties will support the government's decision, which was made taking into account the public's view in totality," he said.

Shares in both Berjaya and Berjaya Sports Toto - one of three gambling operators in the country - tumbled 3.4 percent on Friday before the announcement.

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