

Pressure mounts on PM to act against Ahmad
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Wong Choon Mei

Embattled Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi is facing mounting pressure to take swift and decisive action against Umno colleague, Ahmad Ismail, who recently stirred up a storm with comments that allegedly described the Chinese community as squatters in the country.

"The government can stem the tide of anxiety by just being fair and reasonable, which is to take Umno disciplinary or police action against Ahmad Ismail urgently. That will cool the climate of uncertainty," Ramon Navaratnam, chairman of Asian Strategy and Leadership Institute told Malaysiakini.

The country has in the past two weeks been gripped by news of Ahmad's alleged verbal attack against the Chinese community. Public clamouring for his punishment has grown louder by the day, with scores of civil groups, NGOs and Chinese-based parties demanding that he be sacked from his party .

pak lah and bn leaders meeting on ahmad ismail racial slur umno bukit bendera penang 090908 04The 14-member ruling Barisan Nasional coalition yesterday convened a meeting to decide on the fate of the Bukit Bendera division chief but in the end, deferred making any decision.

Abdullah, who chaired the meeting, said the component parties had opted "to respect Umno's procedure" and let the party decide on Ahmad's fate. Umno, the backbone of the coalition, is due to hold an emergency meeting later today.

Showdown

Nevertheless, some observers believe it might be difficult for Umno to punish Ahmad, who has defied both the prime minister and his deputy Najib Abdul Razak. The little-known state-level politician has stood his ground even though both Abdullah and Najib have apologised on his behalf.

"If Umno does not play to the gallery and follow the rules strictly, there is no doubt that Ahmad and several others would have been charged with criminal intimidation and sedition by now.

"I expect a showdown between Ahmad and Abdullah. I suspect it not just about Ahmad's pride but more than that it serves his agenda and his backers. We will wait for them to come out of the shadow," said political analyst Khoo Kay Peng.

ahmad ismail putrajaya meet pm 090908 06Ahmad, who has refused to apologise for the comments made while campaigning in the recent Permatang Pauh by-election, claims his speech was taken out of context by the Sin Chew Daily newspaper, which reported the incident in its Aug 25 edition.

Yet the burly leader was caught at it again earlier this week, this time warning Malaysian Chinese not to mimic American Jews who sought not only to control the country's economy but also its political power. His supporters went a step further, ripping down a poster of

former Penang Chief Minister Koh Tsu Koon and tearing it into pieces.

Stop dithering

Koh is also acting president of Gerakan, a component party of the 14-member BN coalition. His party has condemned the act, urging the government to arrest Ahmad under the draconian Internal Security Act, which allows authorities to detain suspects indefinitely.

Former health minister Chua Jui Meng, who is also Bakri division chief for the MCA, also spoke out against Ahmad. The MCA is the main Chinese-based party in the Barisan.

"His show of violence is not only an offence against Koh Tsu Koon and Gerakan, but against the entire Barisan Nasional and must be constituted as a direct challenge to the Prime Minister, the Deputy Prime Minister and the Malaysian government," Chua said in a statement.

"Umno must decide now whether it is better to lose one man or to risk the entire Barisan Nasional coalition," he added.

Meanwhile, the cloudy political situation has hit the stock market. Share prices continued to head south in early morning trade, with the benchmark Composite Index down 2.17 points to 1,066.38 at 9.48 am.

Dealers said fear that racial tensions could further escalate were weighing on investors. The index had closed at 1,068.55 points on Tuesday, down by 7.38 points.

"It's not so much anything to do with the fundamentals, just the increasing uncertainty," said Chehan Perera, research head at KAF, Seagroatt and Campbell.

According to opposition veteran Lim Kit Siang, the longer Abdullah and his Umno party dithered, the more it exposes the the country to danger from "extremist and irresponsible politicians" who hold the entire country to ransom by their unreasonable behaviour.

"The whole issue is whether Abdullah will stop his flip-flops and assert his authority and leadership to demonstrate that he is the prime minister for all Malaysians regardless of race, religion or political beliefs and remain true to his pledges and commitments to uphold the 1957 Merdeka social contract, the 1963 Malaysia Agreement, the 1970 Rukunegara and the Vision 2020 objective of a Bangsa Malaysia (Malaysian race)," the DAP stalwart said in a statement.