

PM-to-be faces furore over Umno graft sweep

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S Pathmawathy & Rahmah Ghazali

Incoming prime minister Najib Razak faced a growing furore today over corruption charges against members of his Umno party.

Fifteen members of the ruling Umno party were yesterday reprimanded over vote-buying during intense campaigning ahead of internal leadership elections next week.

The most prominent was Mohd Ali Rustam, who was running to become deputy prime minister but is now disqualified.

Home Minister Syed Hamid Albar said the decision to punish the party members was potentially damaging, and that although Umno needs to stamp out money politics the timing was unfortunate.

"If action is taken before you reach the final hurdle, then things will collapse. When it collapses, it will create a lot of undercurrents," he said, according to The Star daily.

"And these undercurrents for Umno in its present state are not healthy," he said, referring to the party's crisis of confidence since disastrous results in general elections a year ago.

Najib has rejected suggestions that the move against Mohd Ali - seen as close to Abdullah's outgoing administration - could trigger a split within the party.

Umno a giant patronage machine

James Chin, a political analyst from Monash University's campus in Kuala Lumpur, said vested interests meant Najib would survive the furore despite shouts of outrage from Abdullah's faction.

"The best way to describe Umno is that it's a giant patronage machine. When people are angry it simply means they've been cut out of patronage. Those who are still on the gravy train will never go against the leader," he said.

Adding to the pressure on Najib, former cabinet minister Zaid Ibrahim today appealed to the king to block his appointment as prime minister because of "unanswered allegations" over corruption and a murder.

"The air must be cleared, it is thick with accusations and doubts which can only undermine the office of the prime minister if he were to assume it," Zaid, a maverick who was sacked from the party last year, said in a speech.

Najib has been forced to repeatedly deny any involvement in the 2006 murder of 28-year-old Mongolian woman Altantuya Shaariibuu, the lover of one of his close aides, whose body was blown up with military-grade explosives.

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