

Tensions rise between No 1, No 2 camps
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Prime Minister-to-be Najib Abdul Razak today took pains to deny there was any selective persecution of Umno deputy president hopeful Mohd Ali Rustam, who reportedly has the backing of the outgoing premier.

He stressed that Mohd Ali was not made a scapegoat in the ruling party's fight against money politics where the deputy president candidate had been barred by the powerful Umno disciplinary committee from contesting in next week's polls.

He added that the disciplinary committee had acted based on information and Mohd Ali was not made a scapegoat in the party's efforts to fight money politics.

"We cannot question the disciplinary board's intention and must place our confidence in it if we want to clean up Umno," he told reporters in Putrajaya this morning.

Najib was also asked on the government's stand to allow a 'corrupt' leader to remain as the chief minister.

"The facts in his case are different in that the work (money politics) was done by certain people. Because this is based on facts, the disciplinary board decided that he could hold the post," he responded.

Mohd Ali is the Malacca Chief Minister. He is also the incumbent party vice-president.

Najib also said that the party will not deny any aggrieved parties their right to appeal to the party's appeal board.

Muhyiddin: Don't blame me

At the same time, another deputy president candidate Muhyiddin Yassin dismissed the accusation that he was involved in a conspiracy to stop Mohd Ali from participating in the contest.

Muhyiddin, who is the international trade and industry minister, appears to have received the nod from Najib for the much-coveted deputy post.

"Why question the credibility of the disciplinary committee, as if ... they act on my order. Who am I (to order them)?"

"Those involved (in money politics) have to look at themselves and not blame others when they are punished," he told Utusan Malaysia.

Calling it the worst slander against him since his foray into politics, Muhyiddin said he did not know why he was being targeted for what happened to Mohd Ali.

"Maybe because I am his main competitor, so this is being done to tarnish my image. But the delegates know who I am.

"I have always steered clear of money politics because I do not want my sacrifices over the four decades in politics to be tainted by such acts," he added.

Ignore his appeal

Meanwhile, former premier Dr Mahathir Mohamad - a major critic of PM Abdullah Ahmad Badawi - said the party should ignore Mohd Ali's appeal against the disciplinary committee's decision.

He said any reversal of the decision will seriously jeopardise the image and credibility of the party.

"Of course, those found guilty have the right to appeal. But everyone knows he is guilty. If suddenly this person is given room (appeal is upheld), it will destroy the credibility of Umno and the disciplinary board.

"Do not meddle with the decision (by the committee). If the supreme council says otherwise, then there is no need for a disciplinary committee," he told Utusan.

The 83-year-old former Umno president said leaders like Mohd Ali should place party interest above self and use this opportunity to show his undivided loyalty.

"But should he only think of himself, then it shows that the quality of Umno leaders have declined," he added.

As for those who feel sympathetic towards Mohd Ali, Mahathir said these are the people who support the practice of money politics.

Mohd Ali's fate now rests on the final supreme council meeting before the party's three-day general assembly which is to kick off on March 26.

The supreme council, the party's highest decision-making body - can opt not to endorse the disciplinary committee's decision to bar him from the polls.

A number of key Abdullah loyalists have recently been investigated for vote-buying by the disciplinary committee and the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission.

Among them are Tourism Minister Azalina Othman and Federal Territories Umno Youth chief Norza Zakaria - both of whom are vying for a seat in the supreme council.

Last week, Norza was charged in the Temerloh court in Pahang today for allegedly buying votes while Azalina's office was raided by the MACC.