

Dr Mahathir slams 'unsavoury characters' in new cabinet
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Dr Mahathir Mohamad has registered his dissatisfaction over the inclusion of several distasteful characters in the new cabinet by his protege Najib Abdul Razak.

However, the 83-year-old statesman was glad that newly-elected Umno Youth chief Khairy Jamaluddin had been left out.

In congratulating the new appointees in a blog posting, Mahathir said: "The exclusion of Khairy, who was found guilty of corruption by the Umno disciplinary committee but allowed to contest for head of Umno Youth, seem to indicate a desire on the part of the new prime minister to rid Umno of the blatantly corrupt politician."

But on the same note, he added: "Unfortunately the inclusion of several unsavoury characters who had been accused of being corrupt while in the previous government, seem to negate this desire."

Mahathir did not name the 'unsavoury' characters in the new line-up, which also includes his son, Mukhriz, as deputy international trade and industry minister.

Mukhriz's appointment ran foul of party convention as he was defeated by Khairy, the son-in-law of former premier Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, in the Umno Youth contest.

Meanwhile, Mahathir said the government must know that it has less than three years to regain the support of the people.

"A good opportunity for doing this by meticulously excluding dubious characters has been partially overlooked," he pointed out.

Don't cover up for big names

During his tenure as prime minister, Mahathir said, ministers, deputy ministers, menteri besar and chief ministers were required to declare their assets.

"But the declarations did not reveal much. Some ministers were queried by the then Anti-Corruption Agency but no charges could be made.

"Still talks about corrupt menteri besar and chief ministers in particular were frequently heard. No one was prepared to come forward to give evidence," he added.

In the end, Mahathir said, he had to simply drop the MBs whom were said to be corrupt but no charges were made against them as they would not stand up in a court of law.

"What matters is that the level of corruption among ministers and civil servants was never high before and did not hamper the implementation of government projects and did not result in abuses of ministerial power.

"I don't believe that corruption can be totally eradicated. But it can be minimised. From the complaints I hear today, corruption especially in the government party has reached record

levels during the tenure of the last PM," he said.

"Certainly everyone is aware as never before of the corruption of the candidates for the Umno supreme council. The results of the enquiry by the disciplinary committee are hardly satisfactory. But a committee member has said that the enquiries would go on," he added.

In view of this, Mahathir hoped there will be no cover-up whether by the disciplinary committee or by the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission even if it involves big names in the government.

The 'supreme irony'

Responding to Mahathir's comments, DAP stalwart Lim Kit Siang pointed out that the former premier's disapproval of the cabinet has intensified in a matter of days.

"Only last week, Mahathir was prepared to give grudging approval for the Najib cabinet, describing it as 'more or less graft free' and praise for Najib - that he 'did very well by dropping most of the people who have been accused of corruption, although one or two slipped in'.

"By yesterday however, the 'one or two' ballooned to 'several unsavoury characters who had been accused of being corrupt while in the previous government' - although it is not clear whether he meant only the Abdullah premiership or included his own premiership as well," he said.

Be that as it may, Lim said, 25 of the 29 ministers in the Najib cabinet had been in the previous government, which is a high percentage of over 86 percent for such a small group of people.

"The integrity of every minister is impugned and everyone of these 25 ministers must clear their reputation, whether by challenging Mahathir to publicly name the 'unsavoury characters' or collectively taking the former prime minister to court for defamation," he added.

Lim said Mahathir's attack is the latest in a lengthening list of at least 20 setbacks suffered by Najib in the first two weeks of his premiership. "In just two weeks, the momentum of euphoria and 'feel good' factor of a new prime minister has fast dissipated."

"It has enabled Mahathir to adopt a 'holier than thou' stance, writing in his blog: 'From the complaints I hear today, corruption especially in the government party has reached record levels during the tenure of the last PM'," he said.

Labelling it as a 'supreme irony', Lim noted that when Abdullah succeeded Mahathir, he came in as 'Mr Clean' and was given an unprecedented mandate in the 2004 general election to be "a modern-day Justice Bao to clean up the Augean stables."

"But Abdullah not only failed to walk the talk to wage an all-out war against graft, corruption became even worse to allow his predecessor to now turn the table against him.

"Mahathir's indictment cannot be denied as this is also borne out by Malaysia's worsening ranking in the Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index with its precipitous fall from No 37 in 2003 to No 47 in 2008," he said.

However, Lim said Mahathir is the last person with the moral right and integrity to pass judgment on the rampant corruption in Malaysian public life today.

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