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# I never condoned sacking of Salleh Abas, says Zaid

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PETALING JAYA: Apologise to the judges sacked in 1988, then move forward to repair and reform the judiciary, Datuk Zaid Ibrahim said.

"If one says it was not a major problem, then there is no need for all this, but it was a serious problem. And what is so difficult about saying sorry?" the minister in the prime minister's department said.

Answering his critics yesterday, Zaid said although he had supported the chairing of the tribunal to try Tun Salleh Abas for misconduct, he had never condoned the sacking of the then lord president.

"These are two separate issues," he said.

The latest to question his motives was former prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad who said that Zaid, the president of the Muslim Lawyers Association at the time, "had fully supported the action that was taken".

"My detractors inferred, from my supporting the appointment of Tun Hamid Omar

as tribunal chairman and the fact that I opposed the boycott by the Bar then, that I supported the sacking," Zaid said.

"These accusations and suggestions are unfair and inaccurate."

Salleh was sacked in August 1988 after writing a letter to the King on behalf of the judges expressing disappointment with accusations made by Dr Mahathir.

Five judges of the Federal Court, who granted Salleh an interlocutory order against the tribunal headed by his successor, Hamid, were suspended in July that year.

Three of them, Tan Sri Azmi Kamaruddin, Tan Sri Wan Hamzah Wan Mohamed Salleh and Tan Sri Eusoffe Abdoolcader, were, however, reinstated three months later.

Zaid said he was never in favour of Salleh's ouster, nor did he ever suggest that the grounds for the dismissal were fair or just.

"In fact, it was not right. But the issue of Hamid's chairing the tribunal was a legal one. Since he was second in line, my understanding was that if



Datuk Zaid Ibrahim says he mooted the idea of an apology as far back as two years ago

the lord president could not chair the tribunal, it had to go to the number two. And he was appointed by the King.

"Of course, the question is, should Hamid have accepted? I don't think he should have, but he did," he said.

Zaid added that because he viewed Hamid's appointment as valid and a *fait accompli*, the Bar's boycott would not

have done any good.

He said he regretted that he may have been misunderstood. "Yet, some of my detractors still think that no wrong was done 20 years ago. Which is the greater tragedy?"

The proposal for an apology did not come about "because I now have an office in Putrajaya".

Zaid said he had mooted the idea as far back as two years ago in parliament.

"Some of the things happening now stems from that episode, so the healing process must start from there."

On whether the government was anywhere near to deciding on an apology, Zaid said, "I think you have to ask someone else".

Even so, he said the current administration wanted change and reform in the judiciary.

"Many institutions have been tarnished. Now the administration of Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and his deputy Datuk Seri Najib Razak want to see change and reform in the judiciary and we should give them a chance."

Asked if he was upset with

Dr Mahathir's comments, Zaid said he had high regard for the former prime minister.

"I have no problem with his statement at all. I just don't want him to be influenced," he said.

Zaid also said he disagreed with the DAP chairman and member of parliament for Bukit Gelugor, Karpal Singh, who said Dr Mahathir should be the one to apologise to the sacked judges.

"All these people want blood. I don't want that. I just want for us to move on, to restore confidence in the judiciary. The repair work has to be done, we need to look at reforms to mitigate pressure from outside forces and on the appointment and promotion of capable judges.

"Times have changed. We need to revitalise our institutions, judiciary, the courts, legal service, police and parliament," he said.

Zaid said he was happy that Salleh, Azmi and, to a lesser extent, Wan Hamzah would welcome an apology.

"That means that we have to press for it."