

NEP needed 'captains' to succeed, says BN
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By Shannon Teoh

KUALA LUMPUR, Feb 25 — Several Barisan Nasional (BN) leaders have dismissed criticism that the New Economic Policy (NEP) had only succeeded in creating a class of Malay capitalists, reasoning that the 1970 programme had needed these "captains" to ensure its success.

Despite admitting that not all "captains" were the right choice, however, the leaders insisted that the NEP had achieved its goals, pointing to the drop in poverty levels from nearly half of the population when the policy was put in place in 1970 to under four per cent today.

"Any policy will have problems but we always need captains who can deliver. The only question is choosing the right captains," Youth and Sports Minister Datuk Seri Ahmad Shabery Cheek said.

Umno's former Finance Minister Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah (picture) said yesterday that the NEP was never meant to create an incubated class of Malay capitalists but to address poverty and to raise the level of Malay participation in the economy.

The Kelantan prince, who narrowly lost an Umno leadership battle with then Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad in 1987, also said the NEP had become a major source of disunity with the government only recruiting Malays into the civil service.

But Umno Youth deputy chief Datuk Razali Ibrahim said it was untrue that the lack of unity was due to government bias, pointing out that there are also non-Malay leaders in the civil service.

"Around the world, conflict is fought over race, religion and land. In Malaysia, we have all three and still the NEP has succeeded in achieving racial harmony. Has poverty gone down? Yes and in any country that gets wealthier, many prefer to work in the private sector.

"But can we promote non-Malays if there are not enough of them in the civil service? If there are only a few Chinese or Indians, we can't promote all of them just so we can have an equal number as Malays. That would be unjust," the deputy youth and sports minister said.

In recent weeks, Dr Mahathir's policies have been the subject of scrutiny after the Najib administration decided to settle out of court the RM589 million debt owed by former Malaysia Airline System Bhd (MAS) chief Tan Sri Tajudin Ramli.

The settlement sum was undisclosed, prompting intense public criticism and calls from lawmakers across the political divide for taxpayers to know how much of public funds had been recovered.

Tajudin, 65, had served as the airline's executive chairman from 1994 to 2001 and was a poster boy of former Finance Minister Tun Daim Zainuddin's now-discredited policy of nurturing a class of Malay corporate captains on government largesse during the Mahathir

administration.

Tajudin and others like former Renong chairman Tan Sri Halim Saad flew high in the 1990s but their true mettle was tested during the Asian financial crisis. Nearly all of them fared poorly.

This led Tengku Razaleigh to yesterday criticise Dr Mahathir's policy, which opposition lawmakers have also called an abuse of the NEP to cultivate "instant millionaires" and politically-connected businessmen aligned to Malaysia's longest-serving PM.

But the former prime minister denied yesterday that his government had handpicked Malays to be billionaires, saying the different races were represented at all levels of the economic ladder.

He said when he was prime minister from 1981 to 2003, "other races also became millionaires and billionaires," pointing to the likes of Berjaya's recently retired chairman Tan Sri Vincent Tan, Hong Kong-based Robert Kuok and communications magnate Ananda Krishnan.

MCA central committee member Datuk Ti Lian Ker pointed out this was possible despite the NEP creating an "unjust economic playing field" as leaders had ensured "liberalisation of the economy despite politicians playing the Bumiputera racial card."

He cited former MCA president Tun Dr Ling Liong Sik, who led the BN component from 1986 to 2003, as a key figure in ensuring the 30 per cent Bumiputera quota in areas such as government scholarships and corporate equity was not raised even further.

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