

Doubts about Najib at highest level in a divided Umno, says grassroots leader

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By Md Izwan

The credibility of an Umno president has never been under such doubt and scrutiny as it is now with Datuk Seri Najib Razak, a party division chief said, as grassroots members and the general public seethe over the controversial land deal between troubled 1Malaysia Development Bhd (1MDB) and pilgrims' fund Lembaga Tabung Haji.

The open criticism by Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad of Datuk Seri Najib Razak since last year had already divided ordinary Umno grassroots members despite shows of solidarity, such as the one in March at a gathering between the prime minister and party division leaders from around the country. But the Tabung Haji-1MDB land deal might turn up the pressure on Najib even more, said Kulim Umno division chief Datuk Abdul Aziz Sheikh Fadzir.

"When there is no immediate action, it gives an impression that the prime minister is somehow involved and those at the grassroots are worried and doubtful. We need to tackle this doubt," Aziz told The Malaysian Insider, referring to controversies surrounding 1MDB and the lack of satisfactory answers.

1MDB recently sold Tabung Haji 0.63ha of land at the Tun Razak Exchange project for RM188.5 million, far more than what it paid when it bought the land from the government at RM65 per square foot.

"The sentiment at the grassroots is one of anger and disappointment," the Kulim-Bandar Baru MP added.

Never before in Umno's history, Aziz said, has the party president's credibility been cast under so much doubt.

"Now, the honourable president is under doubt as to his credibility, and the doubts are making people lose confidence in him and lose respect towards him.

"It has never reached this stage before, this is the first time," Aziz said.

This unease with Najib, who is also the Finance Minister and chairman of 1MDB's advisory board, was seen in some of the recent Umno branch meetings in the motions tabled against the strategic investment fund which has debts of RM42 billion.

There was also a resolution for action to be taken against Dr Mahathir for his criticism of Najib, a sign of how divisive the feud between the former and current prime minister has become.

Umno's more than 20,000 branches nationwide are to complete their annual general meetings for this year by the end of May.

Some of the motions tabled at these meetings have been indicative of Umno's internal strife. They either want Dr Mahathir to be censured or Najib to resign from his party post.

However, it is learnt that none of these motions got the support needed to get them adopted as an official stance of the branch.

For example, members in the Bukit Jelutong Umno branch, which is under the Shah Alam division, had tabled a motion in their meeting recently to sack Najib as president.

However, the motion was not debated and not passed, Shah Alam Umno division deputy chief Datuk Nor Hisham Ses said, adding that similar motions have also been made at the division level. Division annual general meetings will only be held after all branches finish meeting.

"We do not prevent members from tabling motions. Such motions are also brought to the division level, but they were retracted. So the motions were not discussed and there was no support for it," Nor Hisham told The Malaysian Insider.

Division leaders are senior middle-ranking party leaders who are influential in charting party policy. At the March 8 gathering, 160 of them had pledged to support Najib.

Pro-Umno blogger Shahbudin Husin said that some branch members in the Federal Territories have also told him that they had wanted to table motions against Najib.

"They called me and told me that motions to sack Najib were supposed to be brought to their meetings, but they could not get them through in time."

Despite these motions not seeing the light of day, the fact that they were even tabled challenges the show of solidarity and claims that Najib has the full backing of his party.

Shahbudin did not deny that grassroots members were split, adding that it has worsened because Najib has not responded directly and on point to Dr Mahathir's attacks.

"(Najib) does not respond or explain himself and this confuses members at the grassroots level," Shahbudin told The Malaysian Insider.

On the flipside, members of the Sri Labuan branch, which is under the Bandar Tun Razak division, had tabled a motion calling for disciplinary action against Dr Mahathir for his criticism of Najib.

The former prime minister has relentlessly criticised Najib's handling of 1MDB and the cash aid scheme, 1Malaysia People's Aid (BR1M), among others.

Dr Mahathir has also accused Najib's family of leading a lavish lifestyle and warned Umno members that the party would lose in the next general election if Najib was not removed.

Former Cabinet member Tan Sri Zainuddin Maidin believes that Umno members must be highly tolerant in the face of this crisis to prevent the party from being split.

"Umno branch members must have a high degree of tolerance just like Najib in order to deal with this crisis of confidence. If they take any drastic actions it could worsen the rift in the party."

Kedah Umno activist Ramli Mohd Yunus, however, sees the rift as more of an internal debate among grassroots members that is positive since it shows that Umno is sensitive to policy issues.

"Members are concerned about what is going on in the country and they are brave in expressing their views because they realise that what is going on in the administration also affects them," said Ramli, who is in the Pokok Sena division.

Ultimately, the internal crisis brought about by the Dr Mahathir-Najib feud, now set to worsen following the Tabung Haji-1MDB controversy, is a greater threat to Umno than any political play by the opposition, which would ultimately benefit from Umno's internal strife, said analyst Ibrahim Suffian.

"Generally people hold Dr Mahathir in high regard, especially Malays who don't support the opposition. Even in Umno he is seen as a statesman," the executive director of polling firm Merdeka Center said.

"The opposition will usually get more support if there is a crisis within Umno." – May 10, 2015.

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