

Najib has too much power for Malaysia's good, says columnist
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Datuk Seri Najib Razak wields enormous authority as both prime minister and president of Umno as the party's interests and those of the nation have become artificially fused, says a Financial Times columnist.

Weighing in on recent events, David Pilling observed that Umno's interests often trumped those of the country, and the two should be prised apart.

"That is Malaysia's real problem. Umno's interests and those of the nation have been artificially fused. For the good of Malaysia, they should be prised apart," he wrote.

Pilling was referring to, among others, Najib's reshuffling of the Cabinet amid reports that RM2.6 billion had been channelled into the prime minister's personal accounts and the scandals surrounding state investment firm 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB).

Since its inception six years ago, 1MDB has amassed debts of RM42 billion. The staggering amount has generated criticism from politicians of both sides of the divide on Najib's handling of the state investment vehicle.

Talk about 1MDB reached a boiling point in July when The Wall Street Journal and Sarawak Report published exposes detailing the cash flow of RM2.6 billion into Najib's personal accounts at AmBank.

A task force consisting of the police, the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission, the attorney-general and Bank Negara Malaysia was formed to investigate 1MDB.

Its progress however came to a halt after Tan Sri Abdul Gani Patail was removed as attorney-general.

Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin was also sacked as deputy prime minister as part of a Cabinet reshuffle after he openly criticised the handling of 1MDB. He remains Umno's deputy president, but many have condemned Najib's actions which are seen as part of a cover-up.

Other moves include the suspensions of the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) which was conducting its own hearings on 1MDB, and business newspapers The Edge Weekly and The Edge Financial Daily, which had carried reports on the debt-ridden state firm.

Tourism and Culture Minister Datuk Seri Nazri Aziz defended Najib, saying the donations came from a "brotherly nation" in the Middle East.

Other Umno members said the "donation" was a form of appreciation to Malaysia for "championing Islam" and fighting militant group Isis.

"Whether you believe the bad version of the story (donation) or the very bad version (slush fund) comes as a small consolation to Malaysia," Pilling said.

"Once considered a model of development, the country's reputation is sinking fast."

Pilling said this also affected Malaysia's financial situation, which has seen the ringgit fall to a 17-year low and foreign investors pulling out of the country. – August 20, 2015.

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