

RCI approved, but its terms are being worked out
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Kuek Ser Kuang Keng

Despite there being no hint during Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak's Sabah visit last week, a state BN leader confirmed that the cabinet has agreed to establish a royal commission of inquiry (RCI) on Project IC, but its terms of reference are still under deliberation.

Wilfred Madius Tangau, secretary-general of the United Pasokmomogun Kadazandusun Murut Organisation (Upko), a Sabah BN component party, told Malaysiakini yesterday that the decision reached at a cabinet meeting on Feb 8, had been minuted.

Hence, Tangau is not worried about Najib's (left) non-announcement last week.

"The cabinet made the decision on Feb 8 and today is only Feb 22. We have been struggling for this for a very long time, so what is another one or two weeks to wait for the announcement? When the announcement will be made is a non-issue.

"I was made to understand that the cabinet had already deliberated its terms of reference," said the former Tuaran MP.

The extraordinary jump in the Sabah population is a very important issue, Tangau pointed out, hence the scope of the RCI "cannot be decided at only one meeting".

"It is only proper for the federal government to discuss the TOR (terms of reference) with the Sabah state government and all Sabah BN component parties," he said.

It was learnt that the Sabah BN sub-committee on illegal immigrants, a panel led by Sabah Deputy Chief Minister Joseph Pairin Kitingan to tackle the issue of illegal immigrants in the state, has yet to call a meeting to look into the TOR.

Asked whether there was concern that the TOR might be tightened to clip the RCI's power, Tangau declined to speculate.

Some matters still need probing

"Most importantly, there are certain things to be investigated and solutions must be found," he said.

Upko has submitted its proposal on TOR and members of the RCI to de facto law minister Mohd Nazri Abdul Aziz.

Among others, the party wants the RCI to cover the Project IC, the future of the estimated 84,000 holders of the refugee document IMM13, and to remove Project IC holders from the electoral roll.

Project IC is said to be a covert operation carried out in the 1990s to grant blue identity cards to foreigners to vote for the BN in elections, resulting in an unusual surge in the Sabah population.

It is also known as Project M, with "M" standing for former prime minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who has been accused of spearheading the project.

Najib's non-announcement of RCI caused many Sabah BN leaders to be very disappointed, including Upko president Bernard Dompok and Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) deputy president Maximus Ongkili, who had been trumpeting what turned out to be the premier's non-event during his two-day visit to Sabah, probably his last before the next general election.

Without giving any explanation or elaboration, Dompok later told the media that Najib would make the announcement at a more opportune time.

Mahathir against RCI on Project IC

Najib's inaction has sparked speculation that key Sabah Umno leaders had convinced him, a day before the supposedly scheduled announcement, that unearthing the illegal immigrants issue would severely jeopardise Umno's support base in the next election.

Some attributed it to the influence of Mahathir, who has repeatedly denied involvement in Project IC and has openly shot down the RCI proposal.

"I think it is a problem, but there is no need for an RCI. The government can collect its own statistics on this (and solve the problem on its own)," Mahathir said on Monday.

However, several Sabah BN leaders argued that Najib did not have a chance to break the news in Sabah because a misunderstanding during the first day's press conference prevented reporters from asking questions on the issue, and a subsequent press conference on the second day was cancelled because of time constraint.

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