

## **Mahathir testifies before Sabah RCI today**

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**By Ram Anand**

SABAH RCI As the royal commission of inquiry's (RCI) year-long remit to probe the issue of illegal immigrants in Sabah nears its end, Dr Mahathir Mohamad will finally testify before the panel today.

Mahathir, who was prime minister for 22 years between 1981 and 2003, has not been implicated directly but witnesses have told the RCI about the existence of a 'Project M' which gave citizenship to illegal immigrants in Sabah.

NONEThe names of his former aide, Aziz Shamsudin, and his former right-hand man, then deputy home minister Megat Junid Megat Ayub, have both been mentioned during the proceedings.

The RCI's term will expire this month, unless the panel seeks an extension of time from the Yang di-Pertuan Agong.

Current premier Najib Abdul Razak has said that the RCI will call 167 witnesses, but Mahathir will be the 209th witness to take the stand.

His former deputy, Anwar Ibrahim, who is now the opposition leader, is also expected to testify on Sept 19.

This is the second time Mahathir is testifying before the RCI in recent years. The last time was in 2008, in the VK Lingam RCI which probed allegations of judicial fixing.

It has been claimed that 'Project M' - as it is sometimes dubbed - was implemented to engineer Umno's entry into Sabah in 1991.

However, the RCI's terms of reference do not include finding out who was at fault for issuing the illegal ICs.

As such, the conducting officers are not expected to delve deeper into issues such as the real reason for the 'project' or who gave the orders.

However, Sabah Law Association (SLA) members, who are holding a watching brief, have previously questioned witnesses to determine the political motive behind the 'project'.

Dr M defended mass citizenship in Sabah

Mahathir has in the past described the RCI as "unnecessary", but also said earlier this year that he would testify if called.

He has defended the move to grant mass citizenship in Sabah, equating it to Chinese and Indians being granted citizenship under first Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman soon after Independence.

The RCI has heard from witnesses that the immigrants were also registered as voters to help BN, specifically Umno, in marginal seats.

It is believed that the immigrants who benefitted most from 'Project M' were Filipinos, followed by Indonesians.

According to official statistics, about 23 percent of Sabah's population are foreigners, though some have claimed that there are as many as 1.75 million foreigners in the state.

About 750,000 immigrants have been alleged to have been given citizenship through 'Project M', also known as 'Project IC'.

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