

The state of Najib's cabinet
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MP SPEAKS Liow Tiong Lai might be walking on cloud nine these days, but he should not get too comfortable. The newly-appointed transport minister has only half of the power left compared with his predecessor Dr Ling Liong Sik.

Liow inherited a Transport Ministry that has had its major power stripped off and placed under the Prime Minister's Department as the Land Public Transport Commission (Spad). Public transport is a major issue that affects the lives for millions of Malaysians. Spad controls taxis, buses, LRT and other forms of public transport. Without the power of Spad, the transport minister is severely handicapped.

Spad is placed firmly in the hands of the prime minister via Umno veteran Syed Hamid Albar. Worse, the Spad chief is accorded with minister's status, the same status as Liow.

This is not an isolated case. Take for example the Urban Well-being, Housing and Local Government Ministry. Providing affordable housing in this country is no longer placed under this ministry. For years, Syarikat Perumahan Nasional Bhd (SPNB) has been the main driver to provide affordable housing, but it is placed under the Economic Planning Unit (EPU) within the Prime Minister's Department.

For unknown reasons, SPNB, too, has been sidelined. The prime minister now created another giant agency called Perumahan Rakyat 1Malaysia (PR1MA) which is also placed under the Prime Minister's Department. Therefore, the Urban Well-being, Housing and Local Government Ministry is left with little power to provide housing to take care of the well-being of Malaysians.

Let's look at another main agenda for the Malaysian government - creating an innovative and scientific Malaysian society. This objective is clear but implementation is again fragmented.

The powers of the Science, Technology and Innovation Ministry have been diluted so much into the hands of the PM's Department through Agensi Inovasi Malaysia (AIM), a government-linked company (GLC) called Cradle and the recently-launched Malaysian Global Innovation and Creative Centre (MAGIC). So, there is not much that the minister can do.

These agencies are not cheap. The CEO of AIM's salary, allowance and bonus is approximately RM69,000 a month. The CEO of Spad is paid a yearly salary of RM480,000, yearly allowance of RM162,000 and bonus of RM60,000 or equivalent to RM51,833 a month. The CEO of TalentCorp is paid RM30,000 a month and car allowance of RM5,000,

which comes to about RM420,000 yearly.

These are just tips of the iceberg. A huge amount of public funds is needed every year to run these agencies. Malaysians should ask how many agencies do we need to run this country? How to coordinate new agencies with existing ones and their interdepartmental politics?

It was revealed recently that some companies have been taking different government grants from various agencies for the same technology project proposal. It shows that our agencies don't talk to each other, therefore enabling companies to take advantage of a fragmented government.

Largest XXL cabinet in history

So, Mr Prime Minister, your cabinet is fragmented, bloated and dysfunctional.

Prime Minister Najib has the largest XXL cabinet in the history of Malaysia with 35 ministers and 27 deputy ministers compared to Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's cabinet of 29 ministers.

Arguably, Prime Minister Najib yields the most powers as head of state compared to other world leaders because he is also Finance Minister and 10 ministers work in the Prime Minister's Department. In fact, an astonishing 20 Members of Parliament or former MPs work in the Prime Minister's Department, heading various portfolios and agencies. Many of them have ministerial status.

To put things into perspective, the President of United States only has 15 cabinet ministers. Najib's cabinet is too large and bloated for a small country like us.

With such a large cabinet, new agencies are being created for new ministers with their new ideas and pet projects. However, few agencies have ever been closed down. Take for example, if PR1MA is the new driver for affordable housing, why hasn't SPNB been integrated into PR1MA? If MAGIC is the new centre for innovation and creativity, why is our government still keeping Agensi Inovasi Malaysia (AIM)?

At the rate we are going, Najib's cabinet will only keep growing in size and country's budget deficit continue soaring. Even with more cabinet ministers, Najib's cabinet has made fewer decisions than ever before. Since the 13th general election (GE13), Malaysia is left on autopilot and it has long headed into wrong direction. Right-wing NGOs and government agencies are left unhampered to create racial and religion tensions, with the cabinet taking no firm stand. The inspector-general of police (IGP) openly defied a court order on the child custody issue and the prime minister did nothing.

The Selangor Islamic Religious Council (Mais) openly defied an order from the Attorney-General's Office, ignoring the 10-point solution from the cabinet, and faced deafening silence from our bloated cabinet. Right-wing NGOs wanted to behead those who

disagree with them, but again our prime minister said nothing. He can't even take action against a racially provocative Chinese-convert professor in a government university!

Opinion polls as of March 2014 showed that only 38 percent thought the country is heading in the right direction. As high as 56 percent of Malaysians were dissatisfied with the government's handling of the economy. The prime minister's approval rating has dropped by a whopping 10 percent since GE13, barely a year ago.

A cabinet as big as 35 ministers will not solve the real problems in this country. The prime minister's complete lack of leadership will bring this country further into anxiety and uncertainty. The real test of the cabinet is leadership.

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