

MP: Gov't set to sign TPPA by year-end

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By Ram Anand

The government is set to go ahead and sign the Trans Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPPA) despite strong objections raised against it, a DAP lawmaker who has followed the debate claims

Klang MP Charles Santiago told Malaysiakini Thursday the final round of meetings will be concluded in April with Malaysia having already given an undertaking that it will sign the deal without objecting to the patent extension clause, which was one of the main concerns for opposition MPs.

"Malaysia is going to go ahead and sign it [...] they are going on full steam to do it," Santiago said.

"They are quite adamant that they will sign it," he added.

The signing of the TPPA, if true, will come merely months after the Goods and Services Tax (GST) comes into effect on April 1 and could cause a further rise in the price of goods and services in Malaysia.

Santiago, an economist who has lobbied against the TPPA, said negotiations have been going on for four years now since 2011 and would finally be concluded by the end of this year.

After a final round of meetings, the 11 negotiating countries involved would present the agreement to their respective cabinets before commencing meetings to iron out the legal details.

Medicines cost concern

The TPPA bill could be brought to the Malaysian Parliament in the coming session in June or the session after that, Santiago said.

Santiago is one of the Pakatan Rakyat lawmakers who have consistently engaged with the international trade and industry ministry regarding public concerns on the TPPA.

In a written answer in Parliament, Santiago said the health ministry had informed him that it had not conduct a "health impact assessment study" on the need in the event the TPPA is signed by Malaysia.

The price of medicine is one the main areas of concern under the TPPA. It introduces a broad range of intellectual property rights and extensive patent rights that could potentially increase the price of medicines and other items that come under its ambit.

The TPPA has been widely criticised not only by Malaysian lawmakers but also by lawmakers in the other participating countries due to the level of secrecy surrounding the negotiations and lack of transparency on decisions made.

Santiago said that any separate deals that Malaysia might agree to would only have a minimal effect on cushioning the impact of TPPA's implementation as a whole.

The 11 nations participating in the TPPA are Australia, Brunei, Canada, Chile, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore, the United States and Vietnam.

Minister adamant against clause

The multilateral free trade agreement - led by the US - aims to further liberalise the economies of the Asia-Pacific region and covers a broad spectrum of fields classified under 29 chapters including public health, environment and the courts system.

Critics however point out that while it is labelled a 'trade agreement,' only five of its chapters are related to trade fuelling concerns it will allow the more powerful countries to dominate the global economy.

On the patent exclusivity clause, Health Minister Dr S Subramaniam was quoted by the media on Tuesday as saying Putrajaya was adamant it would not agree to any extension to drug patents or drug data exclusivity that is being pushed under the TPPA.

The clause prevents generic versions of drugs from being sold during the period of exclusivity, forcing patients to rely only expensive branded versions.

"It (TPPA) must allow the generic drugs industry to grow, as this will create a healthy market and will bring down the prices," he said.