

Government in 'unholy haste' over FTA
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Fauwaz Abdul Aziz

Political and civil society groups today decried the government's 'unholy haste' to sign the US-Malaysia Free Trade Agreement (FTA) and demanded that more time be allotted to deliberate the issues at stake.

They said International Trade and Industry Minister Rafidah Aziz's rush to forge a Cabinet consensus for the FTA belied not only claims that Malaysia was not beholden to US pressures, but also assurances that a comprehensive cost-benefit analysis has already been conducted.

Two weeks ago, it was reported that Rafidah briefed ministers on 58 contentious issues holding up the FTA. They are expected to submit their views this Wednesday, following which a decision would be made on whether the FTA would be feasible or not.

US negotiators are rushing to conclude the FTA with Malaysia by end of March to allow the George W Bush administration to 'fast-track' the agreement and present it for congressional approval within three months.

Despite this, Rafidah said Malaysia is not being pressured.

Important consequences

However, DAP secretary-general Lim Guan Eng said the conduct of Rafidah's ministry in 'fast-tracking' and limiting discussions on the FTA was anything but sacrosanct.

"It's a rather unholy haste with which they are rushing through the FTA," he said when contacted.

"A cabinet meeting would typically meet for, at most, three hours to discuss things. How can they possibly discuss the FTA, with all the issues at stake, and decide whether or not to accept one with the US?"

"There should be more deliberations, consideration, and participation by more stake-holders in the discussions. The possible changes, such as to agriculture and intellectual property rights, have important consequences to the future of the country's economy," he added.

Meanwhile, Monitoring Sustainability of Globalisation director Charles Santiago said Rafidah's directive for ministers to return with their views on the FTA and the 58 'deal breakers' contradicted her earlier assertion that a comprehensive study weighing its pros and cons had already been conducted.

"If such a cost-benefit analysis had already been done then why was the cabinet only now asked to give their views on the contentious issues when these should have been done as part of the analysis?" he asked.

The Anti-US FTA Action Committee for the Northern Region noted that "many questions remain unanswered."

"Until today, despite all our requests and demands, the government has not disclosed the detailed costs and benefits of such an FTA," said committee spokesperson Che Ani Mat Zain.

His statements were echoed by Consumers' Association of Penang (CAP) president S M Mohamed Idris, who said the deal should not be dealt with in haste to meet the US deadline.

"Given the complex technical and legal issues ... we once again reiterate our call to the Malaysian government not to rush into a decision to conclude the FTA.

"Instead, the government should undertake a proper and thorough evaluation of the costs and benefits of such an FTA with stakeholder consultations, including civil society groups," he said.

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