

PM : ACA to be fully independent
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Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi today continued with his bold reform agenda by announcing that the Anti-Corruption Agency will be made a fully independent body. MCPX

He also announced other reforms today to boost the fight against corruption, including passing new laws to protect whistleblowers and witnesses.

In addition, the number of ACA officers would be tripled in the next five years to enhance the agency capacity to fight corruption.

Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi today continued with his bold reform agenda by announcing that the Anti-Corruption Agency will be made a fully independent body. MCPX

He added that the commission would have to table an annual report and be answerable to a parliamentary committee on the prevention of corruption.

"My government will restructure the anti-corruption agency... to become a full-fledged Malaysian Commission on Anti-Corruption," Abdullah said.

"To enhance its effectiveness, transparency and public accountability the new commission structure will be set up to include a system of effective checks and balances," he added.

"It is my fervent hope that by restructuring the (agency), its effectiveness, transparency and accountability will be considerably raised while public trust in its integrity and independence will be quickly renewed."

The government will also take immediate steps to improve the public procurement process through measures targeted at addressing specific problems in the system, he added.

The moves came days after Abdullah announced setting up an independent panel to help appoint judges in senior positions. At present, they are appointed solely by the prime minister.

The judicial institution and the ACA have come under severe pressure in recent years over the government's interference in both bodies.

The civil society has time and again pressed for an truly independent ACA.

Not populist moves

Abdullah also said that his recently announced reforms were not his ploy of winning back the support of the people after BN's poor showing in the recent general election.

He said that his detractors would continue to say "something" no matter when he introduced the reforms.

He added that if he had announced the reforms before the elections, he would have been

accused of doing these to win votes, and if he did not do it after, they would say that he had forgotten his promises.

"But I do not forget my promises. I attend to them when the time comes," he told reporters after delivering his keynote address at the function.

Abdullah also stressed that these reforms were all part of his 2004 election manifesto, but he was unable to fulfill them in the past four years as there were other urgent matters to handle then.

"The manifesto for 2004 is not just for four to five years in the first term.

"It is intended to take us on the long haul and the Vision 2020 objective is really what we want to achieve. It doesn't matter who will be the prime minister at that time," he said.

"We just can't make reforms for the sake of reforms. There must be a certain objective for reforms. If it is not effective, then the reform doesn't mean anything," he added.

Abdullah won a landslide victory in 2004 on an anti-corruption ticket, but opposition leaders and observers say progress has been slow, with few meaningful reforms.

Unprecedented losses in March polls saw Abdullah come under pressure to quit but the embattled premier says he has a mandate and has pledged to implement all his past promises in his second term in office.

The government has been hit by numerous scandals in recent years with a minister, judges and several politicians facing corruption charges.

Former deputy premier Anwar Ibrahim unleashed a furore last year by releasing a video clip apparently showing a lawyer telling a judge over the phone that he would put him forward for a top job.

A royal commission set up to investigate the tape has yet to submit its findings.

ACA sends reform proposal

A happy ACA director-general Ahmad Said Hamdan today welcomed Abdullah's decision to restructure the agency.

"It's very good. It is what you want and what people want," he told reporters.

He said that though the commission would remain a part of the civil service and had to report to the government, it would have more freedom and power.

"You have to report to the government. Just to report. What you want is for us to be free during investigation, no interference; that's what we are going to do," he said.

Last week, Ahmad and his deputy Abu Kassim Mohamad had submitted a proposal for the agency to be completely independent and not just an arm of the government.

The body, which is currently under the Prime Minister's Department, will now report directly to a new parliamentary committee - called the Anti-Corruption Committee - which will

comprise representatives from both the government and opposition.

Abdullah said the committee would further enhance transparency and public accountability as it could seek clarification on the new body's annual reports.

The prime minister added that a new whistleblower's act would also be introduced to give better protection to those who come forward to testify against corrupt practices.

According to Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Nazri Abdul Aziz, the agency had proposed for ACA to operate in ways similar to the Hong Kong Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC).

The ICAC is one of the most esteemed anti-corruption watchdog in the region and is often touted by civil society groups and opposition parties as a suitable model for ACA, which currently reports to Abdullah's office.

Today's announcement came two days after Abdullah appeared non-committal on ACA reforms when asked by reporters to respond to the agency's proposal.

"I have received the proposal and I would decide on it as soon as possible," the prime minister told a press conference after officiating the Barisan Nasional MPs retreat.

Make sure it can bite

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In an immediate reaction, DAP leader Lim Kit Siang welcomed Abdullah's belated reform measures but added that more details were needed before an informed judgment can be made of these measures.

He also said that he hoped the new anti-corruption commission does not become as toothless as Suhakam - being independent but completely unable to do anything without the necessary powers and wherewithal to carry out its mandate.

Lim added that Abdullah should keep up with his reform agenda by establishing the Independent Police Complaints and Misconduct Commission (IPCMC) by tabling such a bill in the first meeting of Parliament next week.

He also wants the premier to free the Malaysian mass media from the shackles of the Printing Presses and Publications Act.