

National Service - Time For Comprehensive Review
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A decade after it was first mooted and being rushed for implementation, it is time for a comprehensive review of the national service to decide whether the service has achieved its intended purpose and whether there is a need to continue.

The programme was essentially a by-product of Dr. Mahathir Mohammed's bid to force his then-anointed successor Abdullah Badawi to announce Najib Razak as deputy prime minister before Abdullah took office.

Recently, the National Service Training Council suggested to expand the National Service to cover all secondary school leavers.

In his response, Defence Minister Zahid Hamidi claims that the government spent around RM260 million a year to train about 120,000 trainees. According to Zahid Hamidi, it will cost the government up to RM1 billion a year to cover all school leavers in the 18 year old age group, which is four times larger than the selected group.

Zahid Hamidi has got his numbers wrong. According to the Government's Budget for 2012, the budgeted sum for Latihan Khidmat Negara or national service is RM 563,951,050 with a permanent staff strength of 2087 personnel.

But the more important question for the minister to grapple with is the question of whether the service has achieved its intended purpose and whether there is a need to continue.

The idea of implementing a national service was mooted by Lee Lam Thye at a national unity conference on 26th October 2002, which was seized by the then Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohammed. The Cabinet approved the idea in principle on 30th October 2002. Within days, a cabinet committee chaired by the then-Defence Minister Najib Razak announced the details of the programme.

To understand the haste of implementing the programme, one must revisit Dr. Mahathir's retirement.

Dr. Mahathir announced his intention to retire at the UMNO General Assembly on 22nd June 2002. It was later decided that Dr. Mahathir would retire sixteen months later on 31st October 2003.

Dr. Mahathir was pushing his supposedly anointed successor Abdullah Ahmad Badawi to declare Najib Razak as his deputy, which Abdullah refused to do. The National Service programme was hastily put together for Najib to have a higher public profile in Mahathir's quest to install a "successor to a successor" before he left Seri Perdana.

The Abdullah Government consented to a Parliamentary Select Committee on National Unity and National Service chaired by Maximus Ongkili with no report submitted as its terms lapsed upon the dissolution of Parliament in 2008. The Select Committee was not revived after the last general election.

A decade since it was mooted, as a responsible minister, Zahid Hamidi should launch a comprehensive review of the National Service programme.

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