

Cleaning Up its Act

From tampered data to issuing illegal immigrants with MyKads, it would seem that the National Registration Department has failed in its responsibility as the guardian of sensitive data. An overhaul is indeed timely.

IT DOES not augur well for a government department when its head is ignorant of a Cabinet directive.

So, when National Registration Department (NRD) Director-General Datuk Mohd Abdul Halim Muhammad declared in an interview that non-Muslims needed to show proof that they had converted or had changed their faith, it created an instant uproar.

How Mohd Abdul Halim could have made such a blunder is anybody's guess but it certainly reflected badly on him and his department.

His ignorance was promptly corrected by Deputy Home Minister Datuk Tan Chai Ho who pointed out that the Cabinet had last year ruled that non-Muslims need not prove to the NRD that they have changed their faith when rectifying mistakes in their MyKads.

So, between last year and November this year, hundreds of MyKad holders have not only been paying RM20, but have also been greatly inconvenienced by having to make legal declarations showing proof of their faith. Will all those who paid up be entitled to a refund?

Maybe not. After all, the department does need some extra money to give away prizes for MyKad applicants! It had announced earlier this year that applicants stand to win a grand prize of a Perodua MyVi and many other prizes.

Just imagine, a government department spending taxpayers' money for no good reason. Malaysians are known to do things at the last minute, so such a costly bait would make little difference. Let's look at some numbers.

Between Aug 25 (when the campaign was launched) and Nov 23, there were a total of 627,964 MyKad applicants. 'This means the campaign is clearly working,' declared Home Affairs Minister Datuk Seri Azmi Khalid.

While we would like to agree with him, we also cannot help but feel that as the Dec 31 deadline approaches, there will inevitably be a rush of applicants anyway. So how many had applied solely due to the campaign is debatable.

In any case, there is a strong possibility that the old identity cards will not be recognised by the authorities after Dec 31. As of November this year, 1.6 million Malaysians had yet to apply for their MyKads.

But even as the deadline approaches, criticism has been hurled against the NRD on alleged shortcomings and inefficiency.

For a start, it needs to address the more basic issues like manning a reliable information hotline. It is not uncommon to get ill-informed officers giving you the runaround. Then, there are technical problems with the equipment which bog down the processing. Some offices are not able to even provide you with printouts of your MyKad details.

But more worrying is the possible breach of security where the information stored in the cards can fall into the wrong hands. After all, the MyKad is more than just an identity card. It doubles up as a cash card, and contains information about your driving licence, passport and even health. How safe is the chip from being tampered with?

When the MyKad was first introduced, we were assured about its advanced security features. We now know that syndicates have found a way to tamper with the photographs. What went wrong? Little wonder then that syndicates are willing to pay up to RM10,000 for a MyKad.

Of course, it does not help when dishonest NRD officials are involved in culling information from yet-to-be collected MyKads and issuing new cards to illegal immigrants. It is not known how widespread this is, but what is worrying is the apparent ease with which this can be done.

The NRD should live up to its responsibility as the guardian of sensitive data. The acts of greed, dishonesty and inefficiency by its own staff are unforgivable, especially in the context of safeguarding national security.

There have been enough of hollow assurances and lip-service from those entrusted with the responsibility. The NRD must clean up its act. **mb**

