

A Case of One Too Many Ministries

Has the enlarged Cabinet justified its expansion by improving the Government's delivery system?

By Clarence Y K Ngui

IN March 2004, after a landslide Barisan Nasional victory, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi announced a new Cabinet line-up. He created two new ministries, split another three, abolished two, merged two more and renamed five. This makes a Cabinet of 33 ministers. In addition, the Prime Minister later appointed Datuk Effendi Norwawi as special envoy to the Higher Education Ministry, a post that comes with ministerial status.

This is certainly the biggest Malaysian Cabinet to date, up from 13 ministers at *Merdeka* (Independence) under Tunku Abdul Rahman, 22 under Tun Abdul Razak Hussein and Tun Hussein Onn and later 29 under Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad. Interestingly, with a population of only 26 million, Malaysia can now stake a claim of having among the most ministers per capita in the world.

Can we afford it? Our fiscal deficit currently stands at 3.8% of gross domestic product while current expenditure has been rising from RM112.5 billion as reported in Budget 2003 to RM117.4 billion in Budget 2004.

But more importantly, after nine months, the major question is whether the *rakyat* is getting better services from the enlarged and diversified ministries. Has this move improved the Government's delivery system? Or are we simply having too many



Is the rakyat better served with the enlarged and diversified ministries?

ministers and too many different ministries?

'The Government services are getting much better. They are more responsible and more responsive to our complaints,' says Datuk Michael Chong of the MCA Public Services and Complaints Department. He notes that today, most Government departments are beginning to cast off their

tidak apa (don't care) attitude. Chong believes that with more ministries, the public will be able to get better services, especially when the division of responsibilities becomes more and more refined.

Another Government backbencher, Dr Wee Ka Siong, Member of Parliament for Ayer Hitam, shares Chong's viewpoint, 'I believe the Prime Minister has his reasons

to have such a large Cabinet.' Wee says that having more ministries allows for quicker response to the *rakyat's* woes. At the same time, Wee also concedes, 'It is not uncommon for confusion among the *rakyat*, especially at the initial stages.' Chong concurs, 'It might be confusing, but only in the beginning.'

However, even a simple confusion can sometimes be magnified. Just take a look at the letters column in mainstream daily newspapers. It is common to have at least one or two complaints a day on inefficient services at various ministries or Government departments. Some of the most common grouses include the *rakyat* given the run-around at Government offices even for a simple errand.

'It has become more confusing,' says Marimuthu Nadason, President of Era Consumer Malaysia, a Kuala Lumpur-based consumer group, since the recent Cabinet appointment in March 2004. He notes, it is not only the Cabinet that is bloated, the civil service of more than one million is equally so. 'Just imagine, for every 25 people, we have one civil servant,' he says.

Interestingly, even some ministers have been reportedly confused by their responsibilities. Last year, for instance, Information Minister Datuk Seri Abdul Kadir Sheikh Fadzir was perplexed when it came to the entertainment industry in Malaysia. He said, 'There is confusion over the jurisdiction and purview of the industry and who should have the last say.' Among the ministries involved were the Information Ministry, Energy, Water and Communications Ministry and the Arts, Culture and Heritage Ministry. Even the purview of pirated VCDs or publishing licensing comes under the responsibilities of another two ministries, namely, the Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs Ministry and the Internal Security Ministry.

'It is not a serious problem. It takes a little ironing out,' says Wee. He believes that once the dust settles, it will be easy for various ministries to carry out their respective responsibilities. 'Perhaps what the Government should do is initiate a public relations exercise for all ministries, so that the *rakyat* can become familiar with the different ministries and their respective responsibilities and jurisdictions.'

There have also been plus points. Ministry

of Higher Education Parliamentary-Secretary Datuk Dr Adham Baba points out, 'The present division of ministry allows better focus of the nation's administration.' For the education sector, Adham believes, it is impossible for a single ministry* to efficiently overlook all matters of education from pre-school to university level. 'It is just too far-reaching and all-encompassing,' he adds. For him, there has not been a single occasion of overlapping of responsibilities.

Nonetheless, Marimuthu is not convinced, 'Having two ministers and two ministries for education need not mean we are becoming more efficient. If it is a global trend for mergers and consolidation for corporations, don't you think the Government should also be streamlined?' Furthermore, Marimuthu points out that since *Merdeka*, there has been only one education ministry, and it has been overseeing the progress of universities and various institutions of higher learning in Malaysia. He asks, 'Why do we need two ministries now?'

Some feel the 33 ministries were created to satisfy the 14 coalition members of the ruling Government. 'We are not talking of merely 33 ministers, but also a larger number of deputy ministers and parliamentary-secretaries. Imagine, almost half of all Parliamentarians hold an executive position in the Government,' says Marimuthu.

Marimuthu asks, 'Are you sure efficiency has improved?' He argues that the response time for Government ministries still remains long. 'It takes at least a few days for anything to be done. Even when a ministry has a public complaints e-mail.'

However, Chong does not share Marimuthu's views. 'Old ministries were split up to create a better flow of responsibilities as well as lighten the burden of those ministries,' he says. 'It is not an ad-hoc decision as a lot of planning and consideration was taken into account,' says

Possible Confusion and Overlapping of Responsibilities

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| 1. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Internal Security Ministry • Home Affairs Ministry |
| 2. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Energy, Water and Communications Ministry • Information Ministry • Science, Technology and Innovations Ministry • Arts, Culture and Heritage Ministry |
| 3. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agriculture and Agro-based Industry Ministry • Rural and Regional Development Ministry • Plantation Industries and Commodities Ministry |
| 4. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tourism Ministry • Arts, Culture and Heritage Ministry |
| 5. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education Ministry • Higher Education Ministry |

Source: MB

Chong. For example, he lauds the Government's creation of two separate ministries such as the Internal Security Ministry and Home Affairs Ministry. He points out, 'This allows for faster clearance of all immigration problems in Malaysia.'

Wee shares Chong's viewpoint, 'There is very little if no overlapping of responsibilities. For instance, the current emphasis on agriculture as the third engine of growth makes it necessary for a few ministries to oversee this crucial sector.' For the record, there are at least three ministries, including the Agriculture and Agro-Based Industry Ministry, Rural and Regional Development Ministry, and Plantation Industries and Commodities Ministry, overlooking this sector.

Perhaps, on the surface, it would seem that these positions were created to satisfy the various coalition members of the ruling party, but Wee, Chong and Adham all reckon that politics is only a minor consideration. Instead, it is about how the Malaysian Government can deliver its services to the *rakyat*. 'Politicians have to be professionals too. This is not about filling positions in the Government, but how we can perform our duties,' says Wee.

Ultimately for Chong, it is not the number of ministries that matters most but how civil servants perform their duties. 'We must always be prepared to serve the public,' he says. He notes that all civil servants must take it upon themselves to provide exemplary service. **mb**