

New structure bodes well for environment governance

The Star - 8/12/2022 15.15

AS a former environment minister, I congratulate Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim for getting the environment ministerial structure right by combining the Energy and Natural Resources Ministry (KeTSA) with the Environment and Water Ministry (Kasa). Finally, the country has the right structure to ensure holistic environmental governance.

In Malaysia, historically, a minister is called "environment minister" when he/she is responsible for the environment sector pursuant to the Environmental Quality Act 1974 (EQA 1974) and its enforcement agency, the Department of Environment (DOE).

But EQA 1974 only deals with pollution control, hence the environment ministry essentially only had direct power over pollution control.

Before May 2018, the environment minister was responsible for the Natural Resources and Environment Ministry (NRE). Under Pakatan Harapan, the minister was responsible for the Energy, Science, Technology, Environment and Climate Change Ministry (Mestecc). Under the government formed after the Sheraton Move, the minister was in charge of the Environment and Water Ministry. These changes to the structure of the ministry all presented challenges to the minister concerned.

Under Mestecc and Kasa, the natural resources sector was separated from the environment sector, i.e. green issues (forestry and wildlife conservation) were not combined with brown issues (pollution control). This made it difficult to draw the line in

determining which party was responsible for tackling the destruction of natural habitats caused by pollution, for example plastic pollution on marine life.

In addition, the environment ministry was also responsible for climate change, which is heavily connected to forestry (as carbon sinks), wildlife and biodiversity. Assigning green and brown issues to different ministries resulted in a disjointed and fragmented climate change agenda.

Furthermore, the natural resources sector in Malaysia was also responsible for land management. There are generally two types of pollution sources for water bodies: i. point source, which is a single identifiable source of pollutants such as effluent from factories and sewage treatment plants; and ii. non-point source, which is based on geographical scales, for example, agricultural water runoff.

Separating the sectors responsible for land management and pollution control not only made it trickier to manage pollution on land (soil pollution) but also water bodies (from non-point source).

Under the NRE and Mestecc, the water sector was separated from the environment sector. This not only confused the public as to which ministry was responsible for river issues, but it also caused coordination challenges in handling river pollution, which also involved state governments.

This became especially evident in a water-stressed area like the Klang Valley with a low reserve margin in its water supply system.

In short, environmental governance in

Malaysia has been fragmented for the past few decades. I am therefore very happy to see that the current environment ministry combines natural resources, pollution control, climate change and water sector all under one roof.

It would be perfect if solid waste management (currently under Housing and Local Government) could be put under the environment ministry too, as is the practice in countries like the United Kingdom, Japan, South Korea, New Zealand, Singapore, Thailand and China.

Is a ministry that covers forestry and wildlife conservation, pollution control, climate change, water as well as waste management too big to handle? If the environment ministry in the countries above can do it, there's no reason for Malaysia to have two or more ministries to do the job. Some of these countries have an even bigger population than Malaysia!

All in all, the new government has made the most important fundamental change, i.e. ministerial structure change, towards a more holistic environmental governance. I am looking forward to seeing these changes being incorporated in the environmental conservation and protection efforts of the new Natural Resources, Environment and Climate Change Ministry under Nik Nazmi Nik Ahmad.

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