

Legacy fault line

Anwar's govt must establish RCI
to investigate entire civil service

THE Defence Ministry's announcement that it cancelled five previous procurement tenders appears sensible and pragmatic budgetwise, in quick response to the outcome of the 2023 Budget dialogue. Undoubtedly, the pivot to all budget consolidation and cuts is the looming global economic fissures. However, given the timing, the ministry's announcement is too convenient despite the proclamations of servility to good governance as-severated by the prime minister.

Here's the intriguing, if not inadvertent, admission: the Defence Ministry voluntarily professed that it won't "compromise on wrongdoings for personal gain in terms of leakage and misconduct in procurement". The ministry also avowed that it won't "hesitate to report leakage or lack of transparency in the procurement process". That's very rich, coming from a ministry that has a ragged history of (mis)spending. Digging into the ministry's past procurements, it has been one financial imbroglio after another, the latest being the Littoral Combat Ship (LCS) financial fiasco.

Take the word of the Special Investigation Committee on Public Governance, Procurement and Finance on the LCS, which outlined the project's "weak financial position" and the ministry's "overall poor management of the contract", on

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top of a criminal breach of trust indictment related to the project. Short translation: the Defence Ministry's woeful back story of financial mismanagement stretches back decades. We could go on and on, but here's a novel idea: how about gutting these absurdities at its core, once and for all? In fact, this novel idea applies to every ministry, department, agency, statutory body and unit that receives and disburses huge funding, allocations and contracts.

At its crux, a common theme emerges: key senior officials conspire with their political masters in cooking up a plot to stream illicit money into everyone's pockets based on "weightage of percentages". There's little risk: fund skimmers face a "relaxed" disciplinary, not criminal, action of fines, transfers and wage cuts, which are superficial punishments. Even if sackings and indictments are enforced, it avoids the root problem: the original sin of the insatiable desire to siphon public funds masked as red tape. Let's face it: financial scandals inherent in the Defence Ministry are also inherent in other government agencies, so a "holistic" investigation is pertinent, if not mandatory.

Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim's administration – in its earnest mission to quash endemic civil service corruption – must institute a Royal Commission of Inquiry to investigate the entire civil service, from top to bottom, to establish this legacy fault line. We concede that the magnitude of this task is so monstrous that it may take months, if not years, to uncover the rot that has been covered up, hidden, deflected and transferred to offshore accounts. Let's be real: it's always skewed towards a certain tribal base depravity, slapped with textures of religious grace and supremacist indignation that this entitled lot, always, lags behind economically.

The blight starts there onwards.