

MACC finds unlikely allies in previously critical opposition, Malaysians
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By Julia Yeow

Since its establishment in 2009, the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) has been fighting a losing battle for legitimacy in the eyes of its critics and the public, with detractors claiming that the commission resembled more of a government proxy rather than an independent watchdog.

Malaysians have grown increasingly frustrated by what they see as a lack of transparency in the 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) controversy, and the channelling of US\$700 million (RM2.6 billion) into Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak's personal bank accounts.

They have now pinned their hopes on MACC, which has emerged as an unlikely beacon of hope for those seeking the truth.

A dark history

MACC first became embroiled in controversy seven months into its inception when opposition political aide Teoh Beng Hock was found dead in the premises of the agency's office building in Shah Alam, Selangor.

Barely two years later, Customs officer Ahmad Sarbani Mohamad's body was discovered at the same building. Police are currently reopening investigations into Teoh's death, while an inquest had ruled that Ahmad Sarbani's death was an accident.

Both incidents had appeared to seal public perception that the anti-graft agency was itself rife with dark secrets, corruption and mismanagement.

That assessment appeared to shift last week when MACC found itself at the centre of a controversy following its investigations into the 1MDB saga.

It became the target of police investigations on alleged leaks of official information on the probe into 1MDB.

When seven of its officers and a former member of one of its advisory panels were hauled up for questioning by police, in a move critics say was a form of intimidation, MACC's special operations division chief Datuk Bahri Mohamad Zain responded with a vow to continue with investigations.

In a sudden shift of sentiment, former MACC antagonists – from civil rights leader Datuk Ambiga Sreenevasan to opposition stalwart Lim Kit Siang – have now become strong allies, voicing support for the commission, which they had once decried as inept, but were now hailing as champions of the truth.

Support from the Malaysian public for MACC has also been uncharacteristic, with a

Facebook public group named "Rakyat Bersama SPRM" (People are with MACC) attracting more than 7,000 members barely 24 hours after it was set up.

MACC's sudden shift from villain to hero is largely due to the fact that Malaysians have been greeted with deafening silence in their questions regarding 1MDB's financial dealings, and are now lacking other institutions to look to for answers, said Cynthia Gabriel, executive director of the Centre to Combat Corruption & Cronyism (C4).

"Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak has quelled internal opposition within Umno, he has removed the Attorney-General and has effectively thrown out PAC investigation with the promotion of key investigators into his Cabinet," she said, referring to Parliament's Public Accounts Committee.

MACC has said it is investigating a former 1MDB subsidiary, SRC International Sdn Bhd, while police probe into 1MDB proper. But given public perception of the police now, "there are a lot of expectations and hopes" on the anti-graft body, Gabriel added.

Unwavering support

Supporters of MACC claim the police raids are a form of intimidation, and part of the government's efforts to frustrate investigations into the 1MDB controversy.

"We must stand up and support MACC, as they are truly heroes in troubled times like these," said head of Transparency International's Malaysian chapter Datuk Akhbar Satar (pic).

"We call on the government to allow MACC to do its job without fear or favour. It has become the only institution left that is seen to be independent and able to find the truth, and all police intimidation must stop," he told The Malaysian Insider.

Akhbar said MACC historically did not enjoy the support of the Malaysian public, partly due to its "dark history" with the deaths of Teoh and Ahmad Sarbani.

However, supporters of the agency urge an unwavering support for MACC, in spite of its chequered past, as its investigations must continue unhindered by government intervention.

Gabriel (pic) of C4 maintained that civil society was not "bailing out MACC" and that it needed to be accountable for all of its past controversies, but stressed the need for the agency to be "preserved and strengthened so it can do its job independently".

"What we are dealing with here, in the current context of 1MDB, is very different and very bizarre. It is massive corruption, the scale of which we have never seen before this," she told The Malaysian Insider.

"We are seeing powers of the Executive having a hand in trying to interfere with investigations. It is of utmost importance that MACC be allowed to carry out its duties

independently.”

TI-Malaysia’s Akhbar said the events of the past few weeks have shown a “complete lack of governance, integrity and submission to the rule of law”.

“Malaysia’s earlier claims to fighting corruption now lie sorely in question. Public confidence is at an all-time low.

“If Malaysians want to see justice and the truth, they need to encourage MACC to do its job, and hope that it will find the answers we are all seeking.

“This hope is especially crucial in dark times like these.” – August 7, 2015.

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