

## **Who's accountable for development funds, asks Sabah opposition**

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**By Robin Augustin**

**The federal government allocates funds for all parliamentary constituencies be they BN or opposition areas, but questions are being asked on how the funds are spent.**

PETALING JAYA: Two Sabah opposition MPs have urged Putrajaya to reveal the amount of funds allocated to parliamentary constituencies, including those held by the opposition, as well as how these funds are spent.

The issue of “no funding” for elected representatives from the opposition in Barisan Nasional (BN)-held states is often used as an argument in trying to bring change and development to their constituencies.

A common misconception in Malaysian politics is that the BN-led federal government would starve opposition-held parliamentary constituencies of federal funding.

In 2015 when the question was raised in the Dewan Rakyat, Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Shahidan Kassim said the prime minister had allocated funds for all parliamentary constituencies for the implementation of programmes and projects, and that the funds are managed by the federal development department or a state's federal development office.

But Sabah opposition MPs, Parti Warisan Sabah's (Warisan) Darell Leiking and DAP's Stephen Wong, say they're in the dark over these allocations and that Putrajaya needs to be accountable and transparent on how these funds are utilised in opposition-held seats.

How are these special parliamentary allocations actually managed?

Sabah Development officer Ruji Ubi told FMT that in BN parliamentary constituencies, the Sabah Development Office would handle requests for funds from BN MPs.

He said although the BN MPs were given an allocation, the release of the funds was still subject to approval from the Sabah Development Office according to guidelines set by the federal development department.

Ruji said the guidelines require due diligence and feasibility studies to be carried out on a project or programme and also allowed funds to be used during emergencies, including floods or fires.

As for opposition-held parliamentary constituencies, Ruji said the management of the funding came under the federal development department.

“BN component party leaders will usually request for funds for specific projects in the area, and these are approved in Putrajaya.”

In 2015, Prime Minister Najib Razak reportedly revealed that every BN MP gets an annual allocation of RM5 million and that this may be increased in future.

Ruji said in opposition-held parliamentary constituencies, there was no fixed amount for special parliamentary allocations.

Transparency needed, says Warisan

Leiking, who is Penampang MP, said to his understanding the RM5 million allocated to each BN MP was separate from development funds for districts, and that it was “unfair” that a BN MP would have a say in how the special parliamentary allocations were used compared with their opposition counterparts.

“But of course, I don’t expect BN to be fair at all. However, if the opposition MPs don’t have a say in it, I can only expect that the BN chairman of a parliamentary constituency will have a huge role when it comes to these funds as the people’s interests are more paramount.”

But Leiking said the recent revelation that Penampang BN chairman Donald Mojuntin hadn’t received the RM5 million allocation since the 2013 general election – when Leiking won the Penampang seat – was a “letdown” for the people of Penampang.

Recently, Penampang BN secretary Pancratius Pudin denied that Mojuntin, as the constituency’s BN chairman, had ever received the RM5 million allocation as earlier claimed by Leiking.

“Something is seriously wrong if they have to ask for funds on an ad-hoc basis and hope that Putrajaya gives it to them.

“Since funds are allocated to all parliamentary constituencies, including Penampang, it is only right that someone from Penampang BN plays a major role in the use of these funds,” he said.

Leiking, pointing to a parliamentary reply in the Dewan Rakyat in 2015, noted that Shahidan had said the special parliamentary allocations had been approved, including the allocations for the Penampang constituency.

“To me, the bigger question is how much has been allocated to Penampang , and how much of these funds have been used and for what were they used?”

This, Leiking said, was why it was crucial for the government to be transparent and accountable, so that the people of Penampang who were also taxpayers are aware of how much their constituency gets and what happens to these funds.

Help resolve problems

Special parliamentary allocations can be used to resolve issues, but are they?

For DAP's Sandakan MP Stephen Wong, the special parliamentary allocations could be used to help resolve problems in the constituency.

"In Sandakan, we have big problems with the sewage. Many manholes are blocked, pumps are not functioning and this has been going on for over a year now.

"I met with the public works department (JKR) on many occasions and I'm always told that they have insufficient funds," he told FMT.

In April, New Sabah Times reported Sabah Deputy Chief Minister Raymond Tan as saying Sandakan JKR required additional funds of nearly RM5.5 million to repair 15 sewage pump stations, nine sewage treatment plants and sewer lines.

Tan said Sandakan JKR was allocated RM3.9 million but additional funding was needed for other repairs and maintenance works.

Like Leiking, Wong said he wasn't aware of how much funds the Sandakan parliamentary constituency was allocated and how they were used, despite him "repeatedly" asking for such information.

"As elected MPs, by right we should have some say in how the funds are used. Even if the government doesn't want to let opposition MPs have a say in how the allocation is used, at least publish details on the amount and how it is used because my constituents have a right to know.

"So in times like this, if indeed the government allocates funds for a parliamentary constituency, then where are they?" said Wong, who is Sabah DAP chairman.

In Sabah, there are 25 MPs. Aside from Leiking and Stephen, the other two opposition MPs from the state are Semporna MP Shafie Apdal, who is Warisan president, and Kota Kinabalu MP Jimmy Wong.

Shafie and Jimmy could not be reached for comment.

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