

## **Aziz Bari: Pakatan Harapan must reduce Cabinet size**

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**By V Anbalagan**

**Constitutional law expert says number of ministers, deputies can be scaled down without repercussions as most functions can be carried out by civil servants.**

PETALING JAYA: Pakatan Harapan (PH) must be committed to reducing the size of the Malaysian Cabinet if it is voted into power, law expert Abdul Aziz Bari said.

“With the rising public debt and some ministries, including the prime minister’s department having too big a budget, Pakatan needs to be clear about it,” he said.

Aziz said PH must not play to the Umno-led Barisan Nasional tune and instead question the ruling coalition why it has been putting up a very fat cabinet to administer the nation.

“The more crucial issue to be dealt with is to have a smaller cabinet. This is from the point of view of taxpayers’ money being spent for the cabinet.” he said.

He added that the bigger the federal cabinet the more the burden on taxpayer funds.

“More salaries and allowances as well as maintenance, like officers and cars and of course, their pension,” he said, explaining that its a long-term burden on the federal budget and not just for the current term of any government.

Aziz said while the Federal Constitution is silent on the size of the cabinet, it has, however, put a limit on the respective state cabinets (executive council).

It explicitly mentions that the state should have “not less than 4” and “not more than 10” members in the executive council.

Aziz said India, with more than one billion people only had some 30 ministers while the United Kingdom with over 60 million people had less than 30 ministers.

“The current Malaysian Cabinet has 35 ministers, the biggest since 1957. Putrajaya also has to bear the burden of having about 1.3 million public servants, which include the armed forces and the police,” Aziz said.

“The difference is that the latter cannot be cut down as they have certain constitutional protections. But the cabinet can be scaled down and this can be done as most of the functions can be carried out by civil servants.”

A minister, for example, he said could be responsible for more than one ministry or department and as such it was perhaps sensible to have only around 15 to 20 full ministers assisted by a group of deputy ministers and parliamentary secretaries.

He said one of the key factors to consider when trimming down the cabinet size is that a cabinet member is the policymaker, not day-to-day manager of routine functions.

“What is important is to have ministers taking care of bigger portfolios like defence, home affairs, foreign affairs and education or Sabah and Sarawak affairs,” he added.

Aziz said it was also ridiculous to have a minister (executive) taking care of parliament as the legislature is one of the three distinct branches of the state – executive, legislature and judiciary.

“It is the Malaysian Parliament that oversees the sitting government and not vice versa,” he said, adding that PH must also make itself committed to that very important principle of the separation of powers in the constitution.

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