

CEP ushers first 100 days tomorrow

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KUALA LUMPUR, Aug 19 (Bernama) -- The Council of Eminent Persons (CEP) will reach its 100th-day of establishment on Monday and the question of whether the council should be dissolved has been a red herring to why it was originally set-up.

Formed on May 12 by Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamed, the council acted as an advisor on economic, financial and other matters during the power transition period and its 'lifespan was widely reported as only for 100 days'.

However, the prime minister last week said the government would still maintain the CEP and that it would not be disbanded yet as its services, especially that of his soft-spoken long-time confidante, was still needed, stirring various reaction from the public, ruling and opposition politicians.

Unfazed by the issues surrounding its operating tenure, a press conference is scheduled tomorrow by the council, obviously led by two-time Finance Minister Tun Daim Zainuddin, who believes in determination and that everything must be done on time.

The 80-year old chaired 261 sessions with, among others, Khazanah Nasional Bhd ex-Managing Director, Tan Sri Azman Mokhtar, TNB President/ Chief Executive Officer Datuk Seri Ir Azman Mohd, Telekom Malaysia Bhd Chairman Tan Sri Dr Sulaiman Mahbob and the Inland Revenue Board Chief Executive Officer Datuk Seri Sabin Samitah.

Others were National Higher Education Fund Corporation Chief Executive Officer Wan Ahmad Wan Yusoff and Director BRIM Division, Inland Revenue Board, Badri Basiran,

He is expected to present an overall report on the mammoth task undertaken throughout the 100 days, as well as, its findings and recommendations to the government assisted by former Bank Negara governor Tan Sri Zeti Akhtar Aziz, former Petronas president and chief executive officer Tan Sri Hassan Marican, business tycoon Robert Kuok and prolific economist Dr Jomo Kwame Sundaram.

The CEP wrapped up its last meeting on Friday.

Daim previously told Bernama that the whole idea of the CEP “is to ensure justice for everybody”.

“We will safeguard the constitution,” he said.

The council convened their first meeting immediately after the announcement of its formation and according to Daim: “I want this to finish within 100 days. After that I want to sleep”.

The team held multiple meetings and daily briefings, studying various issues particularly on the national debt, the ringgit, fuel subsidy, toll charges abolition and removal of Goods and Services Tax (GST) - setting fundamental direction changes, including implementing institutional reforms.

“These are the major things. We are making recommendations to the government. At the end, they (the government) will decide,” he added.

Daim said the despite their age, the council members were committed and doing this as voluntary national service and backed by a young, very hardworking and efficient secretariat", led by economist Dr Muhammed Abdul Khalid and his team.

CEP also played a vital role in reinstating the investors' confidence especially after a tense week that followed the installation of a new government in Putrajaya, and a series of major projects cancellation.

Daim explained that cancelling mega-projects did not mean that the country was shifting the focus of the economy, but simply is driven by the fact that some of these projects do not make any sense.

As such, the government is merely being fiscally responsible in expenditure to manage fiscal debt position, he explained.

“There is no reason to put the economy in a state that is much worse (than before),” said the diminutive tycoon who is known to keep a tight control on finances during his corporate days.

The CEP also has two committees under its purview, namely the Institutional Reforms Committee and the committee looking into the 1Malaysia Development Bhd (1MDB) scandal.

The Institutional Reforms Committee (IRC), set up to make recommendations to the government concerning several key national institutions, has submitted its final report to the Council of Eminent Persons (CEP) and Prime Minister's Department in July.

The council was under fire recently when Daim was reported to have visited China in a bid to renegotiate loans and contracts that Putrajaya previously inked with Chinese companies, which prompted few parties from both the government and opposition to question CEP's role, cautioning that the council may be overstepping its advisory role.

Among them were Rembau Member of Parliament Khairy Jamaluddin who asked the government to dissolve the CEP immediately as it was seen to act not merely as an advisor, but as intervening in government matters.

However, minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk VK Liew said the role of CEP was only in an advisory capacity and that it did not have any executive powers.

The government is not bound by the views or decisions made by the CEP, he told a Dewan Rakyat sitting recently.

Economic Affairs Minister Datuk Seri Mohamed Azmin Ali was also quoted as saying that the decision to maintain the function of CEP was not an indication that its ministers are ineffective in carrying out their duties but there was a need to retain the advisory body's services at the moment.

Excluding Dr Mahathir and Home Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, most members of the cabinet have very little governing experience at the Federal level, although some are seasoned politicians.

Whether the CEP's term will be extended remains to be seen at least after Dr Mahathir's return on Tuesday from his five-day official visit to China.

Meanwhile, two members of the CEP have already been given other tasks.

Zeti was appointed to oversee Permodalan Nasional Bhd while Hassan is now a director at Khazanah Nasional Bhd following the recent shake-up at the government's strategic investment fund.

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