

Suhakam budget cuts, a case of 'don't bite the hand that feeds you'?



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Over the past few months, when meeting up with some friends working in government agencies, as well as in my own university, one constant grievance in our conversation is budget cuts.



Similarly, the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (Suhakam) has met the same fate.

Suhakam's funding was slashed

(<http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/malaysia/article/suhakam-seeks-answers-from-putrajaya-after-drastic-budget-cut>) by almost 50% in Budget 2016 from RM10,986,200 for 2015 to RM5,509,400 for 2016.

This raises the speculation whether the drastic budget cut was due to the commission's voicing out against several government policies and laws that are deemed not human rights friendly.

In a recent human rights day event that I attended, Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Paul Low, however, denied that Suhakam's budget cuts were the result of their criticism against government policies and laws.

What indeed "amazed" me was his proposed solution (<http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/malaysia/article/use-own-rm4.5-million-paul-low-tells-suhakam-after-budget-cuts>), that is, to use the organisation's fixed deposits of RM4 million to RM4.5 million.

Following up on that, in a response to the media recently, it was obvious Suhakam chairman Tan Sri Hasmy Agam was deeply dismayed with the drastic budget cuts and with the suggestion made by the minister.

I quote, "We have to dip into the grants, plus what the government will give. According to our calculations, by the middle of next year or, at most, by the third quarter of next year, we will run out of funds (<http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/malaysia/article/after-50-funding-cut-in-2016-suhakam-will-close-shop-by-q3-says-hasmy>).

"Then maybe, at that time, we have to go around with a begging bowl, protest in the street, march to Parliament or otherwise close shop. Embarrassing!" The budget cuts, inevitably, have a direct impact on the commission's advocacy programmes and activities.

The position of Suhakam has always been a peculiar one. It is common to hear names, such as "toothless tiger", in describing the role of the national human rights institution.

Having worked in Suhakam in the past, I must admit that it involves a lot of challenges. Not only do you need to deal with criticism from civil society, but you also need to deal with criticism from the government itself.

As I mentioned above, it is peculiar simply because, although Suhakam is established by the government, but at the same time, they are the “watchdog” on the government. Suhakam is also the bridge between the non-governmental organisations (NGO) and the Malaysian government.

This then brings me to my second point.

Bearing in mind the potential added value of Suhakam in the protection of human rights, one cannot help but interpret the recent drastic budget cuts as having the role of Suhakam being not only neglected, but also obstructed.

Low mentioned despite the budget cuts to government agencies, funding for NGOs had been increased to RM160 million.

But shouldn't we know what to prioritise?

I would like to again remind that Section 19(1) of the Suhakam Act 1999 requires the government to provide the commission with adequate funds annually to enable it to discharge its functions under the Act.

What are the justifications, then, for slashing 50% of Suhakam's budget, especially now, when the commission has started to receive more positive feedback, not only from local NGOs but also the regional and international community?

Or, to put it bluntly, is Putrajaya sending the message of don't bite the hand that feeds you in the case of Suhakam? – December 14, 2015.

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