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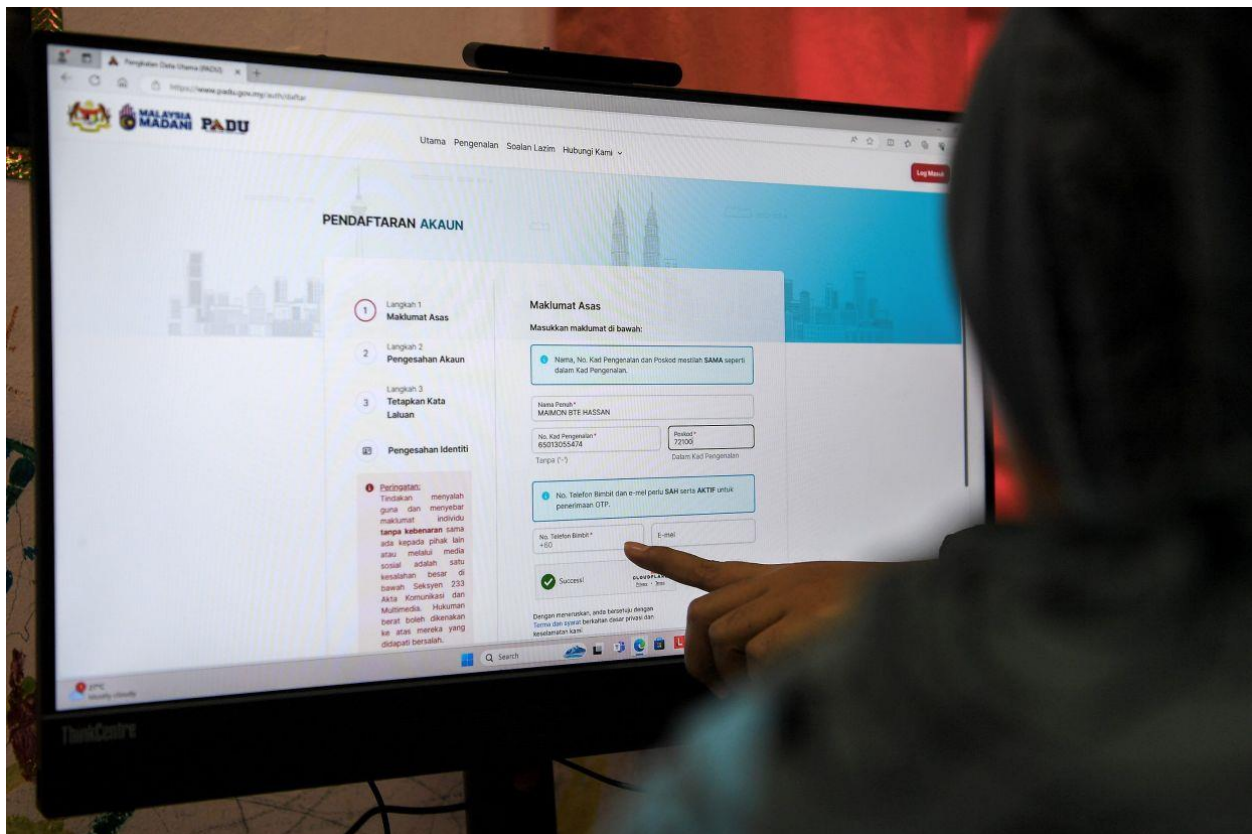
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Suspicious minds about Padu

Padu will enable more targeted policy implementation and allow for more data-driven decision-making and policy-making. - Bernama

TRUST, or rather the lack of it, is the main obstacle to Padu, a database of key socioeconomic information on Malaysians and permanent residents.

People are wary of volunteering details that may be abused and even cause them to lose money.

Government agencies are not immune to data breaches, thus the cautious reaction to the government initiative which was launched on Jan 2. Even though it is unfair to tar the entire civil service, it is undeniable that it could happen if someone can benefit financially.

The experience involving the MySejahtera app remains fresh in memory. The present government had no part in building the app, but its subsequent history has been anything but reassuring. The murky ownership brings up questions over the safety of data although the app was key in controlling the spread of Covid-19.

The Edelman Trust Barometer for 2023 and 2022 indicates an erosion of trust for business and government as institutions. In 2023, trust in business was at 68 points and trust in government was at 54 points, down from 71 points for business and 62 points for government in 2022.

Aid distribution and policy-making decisions require a comprehensive delivery system. The old way is ineffective, messy and wasteful. There are, however, concerns about security, privacy and surveillance.

It is justified to have Padu, which will enable more targeted policy implementation and allow for more data-driven decision-making and policy-making.

Funds can be directed to people who are really in need by narrowing leakages. By helping only those who deserve it, it will also dismantle the subsidy mentality of Malaysians in general.

At Padu's rollout, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim said: "The definition of subsidies is 'handout', assistance to those in need and for decades this practice remained unchanged in Malaysia, enjoyed by everyone, including non-Malaysians. So that is why when Padu is being opposed, I always ask, who are you trying to defend? The foreigners? The wealthiest?"

It's an indictment of Malaysia's subsidy mentality, which has also distorted the economy over the decades, turning policy on its head as the government of the day struggles to balance the books and stay in power with populist measures. A bit of handout here, a bit of handout there, all ineffective.

To be fair, Economic Affairs Minister Rafizi Ramli has explained that standard operating procedures have been established to ensure data security. A number of government agencies are involved in this, including the National Cyber Security Agency, the Office of the Chief Government Security Officer, CyberSecurity Malaysia and the Department of Personal Data Protection.

According to Surfshark, a virtual private network (VPN) provider, Malaysia was the eighth most breached country in the third quarter of 2023, with data breaches up 144% from the second quarter.

In the third quarter, around four user accounts were leaked every minute, according to the VPN provider. According to breach density per day, which is the total number of breaches divided by the population, the country ranked fifth.

Who can guarantee we won't see a repeat of the massive December 2022 data leak involving some 13 million accounts involving a bank, a satellite broadcaster and the Election Commission?

Those who registered for national identification cards between 2000 and 2018 had their data uploaded to the dark web in May 2022. It is important to note that Padu will be integrated with the national registration system.

It is important to know who has access to the database. Rafizi was cagey about how the government would manage access to Padu internally despite the safety protocols.

While that is also understandable, perhaps some clarity on internal safety protocols will ease the fears and concerns of those who believe internal actors are responsible for government agency data leaks.

He did give the reassurance that the government will be "responsive" and "transparent" on problems involving Padu. It is a pragmatic approach that will save time since this government needs to implement measures that have an immediate impact on Malaysians.