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Bringing about change in Customs Department

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BY ESTHER LEE

A year into her high-profile role as director-general (DG) of the Royal Malaysian Customs Department (RMCD), Datuk Anis Rizana Mohd Zainudin continues to move at full speed, effecting changes and reforms she thinks will make for a more efficient and effective department, caring little for the criticism directed her way.

"Whatever people say, the lies or defamation [about me], I don't give too much attention to it. The most important thing is that I stay focused to meet my KPIs and that the stakeholders are happy," Anis Rizana says in an interview with *The Edge*. She has had little sleep since taking on the job, not because she is worried, but because she is passionate about it and has a lot to accomplish every day.

"I'm the kind of person who likes to clear my work and I don't like having a backlog. So, I make sure I've completed everything before I rest for the day. Look at my in-tray and out-tray; it's empty. I clear it every day," she says, gesturing at her neat desk and empty trays.

For one who carries the weight of Malaysia's indirect tax collection, trade facilitation and border

security on her shoulders, the DG's passion for her job is obvious in the animated manner in which she describes her challenges at work.

"The biggest challenge for me is changing the mindset of the officers from the usual way of doing things to a new or different way — to educate, create awareness and get buy-in from the staff, both executive and non-executive," she says.

Anis Rizana cut her teeth at the Ministry of Finance as Deputy Secretary of the Treasury division in 1994 and, prior to her appointment as RMCD DG, she was Deputy Secretary General of Treasury (Investment) at the Ministry of Finance.

Appointed DG in September 2023, she was quick to observe issues relating to efficiency and integrity at RMCD that could be improved upon. "Some issues that affected the image of RMCD were the problem of drug smuggling to Australia, scanning machines that were not working at entry/exit points and the flood of illicit cigarettes in the market. These issues were brought up by various parties and RMCD was criticised by netizens on social media platforms," she says.

The challenge was to build a good team that could fulfil the responsibilities of revenue collection,



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facilitate trade and carry out border control duties efficiently, swiftly and with integrity.

A strategy she put in place to increase efficiency and effectiveness of revenue collection was to conduct scans on all export containers. This is being done by using a more effective risk-profiling and targeted approach. The measure commenced on Nov 30, 2023.

"The instruction to scan all export containers began at Port Klang as a solution to the 622kg drug seizure by the Australian authorities on Oct 12, 2023, from sea cargo coming from Malaysia," she says.

The DG also made the unconventional move, to the ire of some,

of rotating the roles of her officers as a means to strengthen the organisational structure. She says Customs carried out 45 job rotations among officers of various grades and positions to meet each section's need for certain types of expertise.

"This job rotation involves every layer of officers, starting from the deputy director-general of Customs to the executive officers. This step is very important to achieve a balance between the divisions and to ensure that each division has the necessary expertise to carry out their duties with excellence," she says.

Anis Rizana also brought digitisation to the department's work at the ports. The department recently went digital at Port Klang by fully implementing the Standard International Trade Classification, or SITC, system.

"Almost 70% of the cargo is handled by Port Klang; so, this is significant. The transition to paperless will help improve our import-export clearance and, hopefully, improve the ease of doing business. We're extending this digitisation to Penang Port and Johor Port after that."

The DG says her mandate includes strengthening the culture of integrity in the department by

taking steps to prevent corruption and embezzlement.

"This means I will not compromise or protect any party involved in corruption. We are taking proactive steps to improve the import and export procedure at the entry points of the country. We are also implementing an integrity screening process for RMCD officers who will be placed in high-risk areas," she says.

In March, the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) arrested 34 customs officers at Kuala Lumpur International Airport and 11 officers at Port Klang in an operation codenamed Ops Samba 2.0. In a statement, the Customs Department promised cooperation with MACC and emphasised it would not tolerate corruption in the department.

Under Anis Rizana's leadership, RMCD collected indirect taxes of RM55.1 billion in 2023, exceeding Putrajaya's RM53.5 billion target. Collection for 2024 looks promising, as RMCD says it had collected a total of RM41.68 billion as at Aug 31, against the target of RM40.23 billion set for the first eight months of 2024. The DG is confident that her department will be able to meet the 2024 target of RM56 billion set by the Ministry of Finance. ■



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SUMMARIES

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