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PRESS STATEMENT I [25th July 2025]
For Immediate Release

SERI: Trust Must Come Before Compulsion in Digital ID Rollout

Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia – Social & Economic Research Initiative (SERI) welcomes the national conversation surrounding the rollout of MyDigital ID. As a policy think tank committed to inclusive and evidence-based reform, SERI urges the government to prioritise trust-building and voluntary uptake over compulsion.

Earlier this week, the Dewan Rakyat was informed that the government is considering legislation to boost MyDigital ID uptake. While legislative support may be necessary in the long term, premature compulsion risks undermining public confidence in what should be a transformative national platform.

"We must never lose sight of the fact that rakyat's trust is earned, not assumed," said Dr Helmy Haja Mydin, Chairman of SERI. "Digital identity systems can bring enormous benefits, but only if people believe they are safe, effective, and in their interest. Compulsion before confidence risks undermining the very system we are trying to build."

With 2.8 million Malaysians currently registered for MyDigital ID, the uptake remains modest relative to population size. While some countries have seen high adoption rates without legal mandates, this has largely been due to tangible benefits and seamless user experiences.

India's Aadhaar system, for instance, achieved widespread adoption not because it was mandatory, but because government services and financial assistance were channelled through the system - creating a strong incentive for citizens to enrol. "Let the rakyat see how MyDigital ID simplifies life - whether that's accessing subsidies, paying taxes, or interacting with banks," Dr Helmy added. "When digital identity is seen as helpful, people will come on board without being forced."

To further support meaningful adoption, it is important to clarify the platform's purpose and address structural coordination challenges in its implementation. While MyDigital ID is designed to verify one's identity and connect users to a range of digital services, public awareness of its functionality remains limited.

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Many Malaysians do not yet understand how the system works or what benefits it offers. A focused effort to communicate its role and practical uses - such as secure access to government benefits, education, or financial tools - will be critical in earning buy-in.

Encouragingly, several government platforms have begun integrating MyDigital ID. MyJPJ and, more recently, MyBorderPass now offer MyDigital ID as a verification option. However, broader adoption across the digital ecosystem remains uneven. To build real momentum, MyDigital ID must become a seamless key to unlocking citizen services - whether it is accessing financial aid, paying taxes, or applying for university placements through UPU. The more useful and integrated the experience, the stronger the incentive for voluntary uptake.

MyDigital ID will play the role of becoming the gateway to Malaysia's digital government services. Its success will directly determine the effectiveness of GovTech initiatives across healthcare, welfare, taxation, and more. A trusted, seamless rollout can unlock inclusive, efficient service delivery - while poor execution risks undermining the very reforms it aims to support.

SERI also emphasises that legislation should not be the first resort. Mandates may be counterproductive if introduced before citizens fully understand and trust the system. **Instead, thoughtful design and implementation - centred on usability, inclusion, and clear value - will do far more to drive adoption than compulsion alone.**

SERI recognises the collaborative work being done by MIMOS, NACSA, and MKN in advancing Malaysia's digital infrastructure. Looking ahead, it may be timely to consider whether the Ministry of Home Affairs (KDN) - as the issuer of the NRIC and steward of national identity - could be empowered to oversee the distribution of MyDigital ID. KDN's central role in identity governance could help ensure security, system coordination, and public confidence.

SarawakID, which is already in use as the state's digital identity platform, will need to be seamlessly integrated with MyDigital ID to ensure interoperability and a consistent user experience nationwide.

SERI also cautions that overpromising digital initiatives without delivering seamless, reliable experiences risks not only failure - but lasting damage to public trust and political capital. The example of PADU (Pangkalan Data Utama) is instructive. Despite initial fanfare, issues with data accuracy, usability, and inter-agency coordination have dented confidence in what was meant to be a flagship reform. These shortcomings made many Malaysians more sceptical of digital platforms - something policymakers must take seriously as they pursue MyDigital ID adoption.

"Every failed or rushed rollout comes at a cost—not just in terms of wasted resources, but in eroding the very trust we need for future reforms to succeed," Dr Helmy noted.

SERI's research into international GovTech efforts identifies key success factors in driving digital ID uptake:

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- **Usefulness** – Clear, everyday value for citizens
- **Usability** – Mobile-first, intuitive design with multilingual and low-bandwidth access
- **Trustworthiness** – Transparent data use, privacy safeguards, independent oversight
- **Inclusion** – Accessibility for marginalised, rural, and elderly populations
- **Interoperability** – Government agencies must collaborate at the back end, ensuring that systems are integrated to offer a seamless, one-stop user experience

Countries like Estonia and Singapore show that with thoughtful implementation, digital ID systems can flourish without mandates, by making them secure, convenient, and visibly beneficial.

To build trust and encourage voluntary uptake, SERI recommends that the government:
1. Avoid premature legislation mandating registration
2. Invest in public awareness and education, explaining both the benefits and protections of MyDigital ID
3. Ensure platform reliability and resilience, especially considering recent technical disruptions
4. Integrate meaningful services, such as financial aid, tax filing, university admissions, and healthcare access, to make registration worthwhile
5. Facilitate inter-ministerial system interoperability, so that users enjoy a truly seamless digital experience
6. Provide meaningful consent options, including opt-outs for non-essential services
7. Work with civil society and community networks to improve digital inclusion and literacy

"Malaysia has the opportunity to become a leader in responsible digital governance," Dr Helmy concluded. "But we must do it with care. The goal should not be mass enrollment at all costs, but building a system people trust and choose to use."

SERI is a non-partisan think-tank dedicated to the promotion of evidence-based policies that address issues of inequality. For more information, please visit www.seri.my or email us at hello@seri.my.