
TECHNICAL

Direct Taxation**TAX CASE UPDATE****Cash payments to employees in lieu of shares under ESOS**

[Maxis Communication Berhad v Director General of Inland Revenue and Inland Revenue Board of Malaysia](#) (FC) 2014 [Civil Appeal No. 01(f)-42-09/2013(W)]

Date of Judgment: 20 November 2014

Facts & Findings:

This is an appeal against the decision of the Court of Appeal (reported in our [e-CTIM 160/2013](#)) on the taxation of payments [referred to as Equivalent Cash Consideration (ECC)] made to the employees of the appellant, Maxis Communication Bhd. (Maxis) in lieu of shares offered under an ESOS.

In the appeal to the High Court, the Court ruled, in favour of Maxis, that the ECC was taxable under [S13\(1\)\(a\)](#) of the Act but its value was to be assessed under sections [25\(1A\)](#) and [32\(1A\)](#) of the Act.

Subsequently, the Order of the High Court was set aside by the Court of Appeal, which decided *inter alia*, that employees with unvested shares had no right to specific shares yet while their shares remain unvested, and the ECC was dealing with these unvested shares. Hence, it concluded, the application of sections [25\(1A\)](#) and [32\(1A\)](#) of the Act did not arise.

Questions of law

Leave was granted for appeal to the Federal Court on the following questions of law (quoted verbatim from the judgment):

- 1) *Where an employee's participation in an ESOS results in tax liability arising under [S13\(1\)\(a\)](#) of the Income Tax Act 1967 ("the Act") with the taxable value being determined under sections [25\(1A\)](#) and [32\(1A\)](#) of the Act -
 - i. *Does the RM1.00 paid by the employee to the employer constitute valid and sufficient consideration so as to create a binding contract between the employer and employee?*
 - ii. *If the employer subsequently cannot honour the employee's exercise of that option (due to circumstances beyond that employer's control e.g. the employer is the subject of a takeover and thereafter becomes a private limited company), can the employee maintain that his contractual right to acquire shares under the ESOS has been breached?*
 - iii. *Where an employee is eligible to participate in ESOS but his option is at that point in time unvested (i.e. it will be exercisable only after a particular date), does that employee have a valid and enforceable contractual right under the ESOS?**
- 2) *From the point of view of taxation value under section [13\(1\)\(a\)](#) read with [25\(1A\)](#) and [32\(1A\)](#) of the Act, does an employee who holds vested option in the ESOS differ from an employee who holds unvested options in the ESOS?*
- 3) *Whether a payment (i.e. ECC payment) received by an employee (who holds unvested*

options) from his employer (in return for the employee giving up his contractual rights in the unvested options) is liable to be taxed:

- i. under section 13(1)(a) of the Act to the exclusion of sections 25(1A) and 32(1A) of the Act for the receipt of such payment?; or
- ii. under section 13(1)(a) of the Act with the value of the tax being determined under sections 25(1A) and 32(1A) of the Act?

Decision:

Appeal dismissed. The following is a summary of the grounds of judgment:

- 1) The Court was of the view that the ECC constituted a perquisite under [S13\(1\)\(a\)](#) of the Act. The basis of assessment for this type of income is provided in [S25\(1\)](#) of the Act. The word “perquisite” is not defined in the Act, but reference was made to Black’s Law Dictionary which gives the meaning as “a privilege or benefit given in addition to one’s salary or regular wages.” In the present case, the employees of Maxis were offered shares at a price which is lower than market value of the shares.
 - 2) In the case of ESOS, the benefit arising from the ESOS to Maxis employees was considered as a perquisite under the Act, which was taxed in accordance with the basis of assessment provided under S25(1A) of the Act, while the value to be taxed was determined under [S32\(1A\)](#).
 - 3) “Shares” is defined in [S2](#) of the Act as “share: in relation to a company, includes stock other than debenture stock.” Upon a plain reading of [S25\(1A\)](#) of the Act, the elements that must be in existence are:
 - a. A right to acquire shares exists;
 - b. The shares must be owned by the employee under his name;
 - c. If the right to acquire the shares exists, the date when that right is exercised or released.
 - 4) In the present case, Maxis was subjected to a takeover by another company before the option to purchase the shares was exercised (on the vested date). As such, there were no shares to be offered to the employee. It was noted that the option was only vested on the employees, “one third of the shares on each of the first three anniversaries of the date of grant” (i.e. the employee must exercise the right on or after the anniversary date). Hence the date of grant was not the date the employee acquired the right over the shares.
 - 5) In the Court’s judgment, the payment of ECC was not based on ESOS. For the employee to be entitled for shares under ESOS, they must purchase the shares. In a letter by Maxis’ tax consultant, it was confirmed that “Maxis was delisted from the Main Board on 13 July 2007 and hence no listed share price can be attached to the shares...” Based on this admission, the Court is in agreement with Revenue’s contention that the cash payment was not an ESOS.
 - 6) There is no ambiguity in interpreting the words of [S25\(1A\)](#) and [S32\(1A\)](#) of the Act, which in their ordinary meaning, mean that they are applicable to employment income (perquisite) in respect of any right to acquire shares and provides the mechanism to compute the value of the perquisite. The words used and the intention of Parliament are clearly shown, that these provisions apply to shares and not to cash payments or the ECC. Even if there is ambiguity, the purposive approach to interpretation must be adopted (reference made to [LHDN v Alam Maritim Sdn Bhd \(2014\) 1 MLRA1](#)).
 - 7) Reference was also made to the Explanatory Statement in the Finance Bill 2005 which provided the explanation for the introduction of [S25\(1A\)](#) and [S32\(1A\)](#) of the Act. “It clearly shows that the intention of introducing the provisions is to clarify the tax treatment on income
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from employment on any right to acquire shares in a company...(It) is also made clear that (these provisions) do not apply to benefit or perquisite received by an employee by way of cash payment."

- 8) In concluding, the Court gave the following answers to the questions quoted above:
- Q1 – RM1 paid by the employee merely indicated the employee's acceptance of the offer but did not give him the right to acquire shares. His eligibility to purchase shares arose only on the anniversary date and not before that date. He could not maintain the offer to purchase shares by reason of the takeover because Maxis had been delisted.
 - Q2 – The answer is in the affirmative.
 - Q3 – An employee who had an unvested option in ESOS had no right to acquire the shares before the anniversary date. Thus the cash benefit received was not taxed under [25\(1A\)](#) and [32\(1A\)](#) of the Act, but under [S25\(1\)](#).

Members may read the full [Grounds of Judgment](#) from the Official website of the Office of Chief Registrar, Federal Court of Malaysia.

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**IN THE FEDERAL COURT AT PUTRAJAYA
(APPELLATE JURISDICTION)
CIVIL APPEAL NO. 01(f)-42-09/2013(W)**

BETWEEN

MAXIS COMMUNICATIONS BERHAD ... Appellant

AND

**1. DIRECTOR GENERAL OF INLAND REVENUE
2. INLAND REVENUE BOARD OF MALAYSIA ... Respondents**

Coram: Zulkefli bin Ahmad Makinudin, CJ (Malaya)
Hasan bin Lah, FCJ
Zaleha Bt. Zahari, FCJ
Zainun Bt. Ali, FCJ
Abu Samah bin Nordin, FCJ

JUDGMENT OF THE COURT

Introduction

1. This is an appeal by the appellant, Maxis Communications Berhad against the whole decision of the Court of Appeal in allowing the respondents appeal against the decision of the High Court. The Court of Appeal set aside the order of the High Court and affirmed

the ruling made by the respondents dated 10 October 2008 in relation to tax liable to be paid by the employees of the appellant on payment received under the appellant's employee share option scheme. We shall hereinafter refer to the appellant as Maxis and to the respondents as the Revenue.

Leave to Appeal

2. Leave to appeal was granted by this Court on the following questions of law:

- (1) Where an employee's participation in an Employees Share Option Scheme [ESOS] results in that employee's tax liability arising under section 13(1)(a) of Income Tax Act 1967 [the Act] with the taxable value being determined under sections 25(1A) and 32(1A) of the Act -
 - (i) Does the RM1.00 paid by the employee to the employer constitute valid and sufficient consideration so as to create a binding contract between the employee and the employer?
 - (ii) If the employer subsequently cannot honour the employee's exercise of that option (due to circumstances beyond that employer's control e.g. the employer is the subject of a takeover and thereafter becomes a private limited company), can the employee maintain that his contractual right to

acquire shares under the ESOS has been breached?

- (iii) Where an employee is eligible to participate in the ESOS but his option is at that point in time unvested (i.e. it will be exercisable only after a particular date), does that employee have a valid and enforceable contractual right under the ESOS?
- (2) From the point of view of taxation value under section 13(1)(a) read with 25(1A) and 32(1A) of the Act does an employee who holds vested option in the ESOS differ from an employee who holds unvested options in the ESOS?
- (3) Whether a payment (i.e. ECC payment) received by an employee (who holds unvested options) from his employer (in return for the employee giving up his contractual rights in the unvested options) is liable to be taxed.
- (i) under section 13(1)(a) of the Act to the exclusion of sections 25(1A) and 32(1A) of the Act for the receipt of such payment?; or
 - (ii) under section 13(1)(a) of the Act with the value of tax being determined under sections 25(1A) and 32(1A) of the Act?

Background Facts

3. The relevant background facts of the case are these. Maxis launched ESOS when it was listed on Bursa Malaysia. By this ESOS eligible employees were granted options to subscribe for shares in Maxis through ESOS. The options were granted by way of a letter of offer from Maxis to an eligible employee. Upon receipt of the letter of offer, an eligible employee would decide whether to accept the offer or not. If the eligible employee accepted the offer, he or she would sign an acceptance form referred to as the "Share Option Agreement".

4. The signed acceptance form specified the number of shares accepted, the price per share, the total amount payable and payment of RM1.00 resulting in a binding contract. The options vest one-third (1/3) on each anniversary (over a three year period) from the date of the offer. An eligible employee can exercise the option up to ten (10) years from the date of the first grant.

5. On May 2007 Binariang GSM Sdn. Bhd. ["Binariang"] served a Notice of Conditional Take-over on the Board of Directors of Maxis. On 24 May 2007 Binariang made a Conditional Take-over to acquire all voting shares in Maxis for a cash consideration. By reason of the Take-over and the request of Binariang the Board of Directors of Maxis invoked clause 10 of the ESOS Byelaws where the holders of the unvested option were entitled to a payment of Equivalent Cash Consideration (ECC) in accordance with the vesting schedule of such unvested option. Under the ECC, the employees receive an

alternative consideration in substitution or in cancellation of all outstanding unvested options. The cash amount would only be paid to them in tranches according to the original vesting schedule applicable to the outstanding options.

6. The issue to be decided in this case involves the question of how eligible employees were to be assessed for tax for cancellation of all outstanding unvested option in return for the payment of the ECC. The Revenue in a ruling dated 10 October 2008 took the position that the payment of ECC to Maxis employees as perquisite arising from employment under section 13(1)(a) of the Act and not as share based income as contended by Maxis which would be taxable under sections 25(1A) and 32(1A) of the Act.

Findings of the High Court

7. The High Court decided in favour of Maxis and ruled that the ECC was taxable under section 13(1)(a) of the Act but the value of tax payable was to be assessed pursuant to sections 25(1A) and 32(1A) of the Act. The High Court in its decision amongst others made the following findings:

- (i) Under clause 6 of the Maxis Bye-Laws, each grant under the ESOS plan was made by a formal offer by Maxis which was accepted by eligible employees and supported by binding consideration of RM1.00;

- (ii) A legally binding contract was created where eligible employees were granted a contractual right to shares in Maxis regardless of whether the options were vested or not;
- (iii) The offer became a contract when it was accepted by the eligible employees and consideration of RM1.00 was given;
- (iv) The fact that the options would only vest based on the vesting schedule was in fact immaterial. Section 25(1A) of the Act does not require that the options must vest before it applies;
- (v) The grant of the option gave rise to a right to acquire shares at the point of grant;
- (vi) The right to acquire shares in the instant case was released when the respective employees surrendered their rights for cancellation in return for payment of the ECC; and
- (vii) Section 25(1A) of the Act applied to gross income for employees who received payment under ECC and the treatment to tax fell under section 32(1A) of the Act.

Findings of the Court of Appeal

8. The Court of Appeal allowed the appeal by the Revenue against the decision of the High Court. The order of the High Court was set aside and the ruling by the Revenue dated 10 October 2008 was affirmed.

9. The Court of Appeal in its judgment *inter alia* made the following findings:

*Following **Palm Oil Research and Development Board Malaysia & Anor. v. Premium Vegetable Oils Sdn Bhd [2004] 2 CLJ 265** as to interpretation of a taxing statute, and looking fairly at the language used, it is true there was a binding contractual obligation giving the employees a right to acquire shares under the terms of the Scheme, but the actual entitlements remained to be determined, e.g. the passage of time the employee remained in employment. There was no right to specific shares yet. They remained unvested. The ECC was dealing with these unvested shares. We conclude that the application of sections 25(1A) and 32(1A) does not arise.+*

Submissions of the Appellant [Maxis]

10. Learned counsel for Maxis submitted that the High Court had correctly held that the fact that the options under the Share Option Agreement had not yet vested was not relevant. Sections 25(1A) and 32(1A) of the Act do not differentiate between vested options and unvested options. An eligible employee therefore has a valid and enforceable contractual right under the scheme despite the fact that his option only vests on an annual basis over a three (3) year period.

11. It was contended for Maxis the fact is that all eligible employees gave good and valid consideration for the contract and in return for that consideration, the employee acquired the right to participate in the scheme. The takeover by Binariang did not absolve Maxis from

unvested options in return for consideration, namely, the payment of ECC.

15. It is the contention of Maxis the applicable principle of law is that a payment made to an employee to compensate him for the lapse of or the removal of his share option rights is not a benefit provided to the employee by reason of the employee's employment. **[See the case of Wilcock (Inspector of Taxes) v. Eve (1995) STC 18]**. It is Maxis's case that the ECC payment does not constitute additional cash remuneration of Maxis employees and the ECC payment therefore need not be reflected in Maxis's employees income statement for the year in which the ECC payment is paid to Maxis's employees.

Decision

16. The issue under appeal is on the payment of the ECC to the Maxis employees and the basis for taxation of an employment income. It is not disputed that the ECC being a cash payment is an employment income under section 13(1)(a) of the Act. Section 13(1)(a) of the Act provides as follows:

13. (1) Gross income of an employee in respect of gains or profits from an employment includes –

(a) any wages, salary, remuneration, leave pay, fee, commission, bonus, gratuity, perquisite or allowance

(whether in money or otherwise) in respect of having or exercising the employment.+

17. We are of the view the ECC constitutes a perquisite under section 13(1)(a) of the Act. The question to be decided is on the mechanism to tax such income. The basis for taxation of an employment income is provided for under section 25(1) of the Act in which the employment income is taxed in the year an employee received such income. Section 25(1) of the Act provides as follows:

%Basis period to which gross income from an employment is related

25. (1) Subject to subsection (1A), or (2A) where gross income from an employment -

(a) is not receivable in respect of any particular period; and

(b) first becomes receivable in the relevant period,

it shall when received be treated as gross income of the relevant person for the relevant period.+

18. It is noted there is no definition of the word *%perquisite+* under the Act. Based on the Black's Law Dictionary, *%perquisite+* means *%a privilege or benefit given in addition to one's salary or regular wages+*. In the present case Maxisq employees were offered to purchase Maxisq shares at a discounted price. In other words, the shares offered by the employer are lower than the market value of the shares. The offer and other matters relating to the shares are regulated by the Maxis Bye-Laws.

19. We are of the view in the case of ESOS, the benefit arising from the ESOS to the Maxis employee is considered as a perquisite under the Act. By virtue of section 25(1A) of the Act, the perquisite is taxed in the year the employee exercised the right to purchase the shares. The mechanism to tax the perquisite is in accordance with section 32(1A) of the Act where the difference between the offer price and the lower of the market value of the shares on the date of offer is taxed as a perquisite.

20. It is to be noted the peculiar facts of the present case is that the ECC is a cash payment in substitution of the unvested options under the ESOS. The scheme had been cancelled pursuant to a Conditional Take-Over Offer by Binariang to acquire all voting shares in Maxis for a cash consideration. We are in agreement with the contention of the Revenue that both sections 25(1A) and 32(1A) of the Act are not applicable to determine the taxability of the payment of the ECC as argued by Maxis. Section 25(1A) of the Act provides for taxability of gross income from an employment in respect of any right to acquire shares as follows:

~~25.~~ (1A) The gross income from an employment in respect of any right to acquire shares in a company of the kind to which paragraph 13(1)(a) applies, shall where the right is exercised, assigned, released or acquired in the relevant period be treated as gross income of the relevant person for that relevant period.+

21. The application of section 25(1A) of the Act is to be read together with section 32(1A) of the Act which provides for the computation of the value of shares which is as follows:

“32(1A) (a) Where in the relevant period a relevant person acquired any right to acquire shares in a company of the kind to which paragraph 13(1)(a) applies, under his name or in the name of his nominee or agent, the amount in respect thereof to be included in his gross income from the employment shall be –

- (i) the market value of the shares where the right shall be exercised, assigned, released or acquired on a specific date or where the right shall be exercised, assigned, released or acquire within a specific period, the first day of that period; or*
- (ii) the market value of the shares on the date of the exercise, assignment, release or acquisition of the right,*

whichever is the lower less the amount paid for the shares.

(b) In this subsection ‘market’ value means -

- (i) in the case of a company listed on Bursa Malaysia, the average price of the shares which is ascertained by averaging the highest and the lowest price of the shares for the day; or*
- (ii) In any other case, the net asset value of the shares for the day.+*

22. It is noted that section 2 of the Act further defines *‘share’* as follows:

“share’, in relation to a company, includes stock other than debenture stock.”

Upon a plain reading of section 25(1A) of the Act, the following elements must be in existence:

- (a) a right to acquire shares exist;
- (b) the shares must be owned by the employee/under his name;
- (c) if the right to acquire the shares exist, the date when that right is exercised or released.

23. Based on the facts of the present case the employees of Maxis were offered the right to purchase the shares on the vested date. However, before the option is exercised, Maxis has been subjected to a takeover by Binariang. Thus, there were no shares to be offered to the employee. It is also noted that the date of the grant is not the date where the employees have acquired the right over the shares. The option is only vested on the employees, one third of each anniversary and the employee must exercise the right on or after the anniversary date. This is evidenced by ESOS By-laws where clause 7.1.1 states that:

“7.1.1 to the extent of one-third (1/3) of the Shares covered thereby on each of the first three anniversaries of the date of grant, if the Optionee shall have been in the

continuous service of the Company or any of its subsidiaries throughout such period.+

24. On the facts of the present case it is our judgment that the payment of the ECC is not based on ESOS. This is clearly different from ESOS because for the employee to be entitled for the shares under ESOS, they must purchase the shares. The payment which is based on the *%adjusted offer price less option price+* is only a mechanism for making the payment but does not reflect ESOS. By a letter dated 13 February 2008, Maxis tax consultant had indeed confirmed as follows: *%that Maxis was delisted from the main board of Bursa Malaysia on 13 July 2007 and hence no listed share price can be attached to the shares...+* Hence, by this admission we are in agreement with the contention of the Revenue that the cash payment is not an ESOS.

25. We are in agreement with the contention of the Revenue that there is no ambiguity as regards to the interpretation of the words in sections 25(1A) and 32(1A) of the Act which in its ordinary meaning means that they are applicable to employment income (perquisite) in respect of any right to acquire shares and provide the mechanism to compute the value of shares/perquisite.

26. It is our view that the words used and the intention of Parliament is clearly shown in sections 25(1A) and 32(1A) of the Act that the provisions apply to shares and not to cash payment or the ECC. Even if the Court is of the view that the words in sections

25(1A) and 32(1A) of the Act are not clear and may include the payment of the ECC or cash payment, then the purposive approach to interpretation should be adopted. On this point in the case of **Lembaga Hasil Dalam Negeri Malaysia v. Alam Maritim Sdn Bhd, [2014] 1 MLRA 1** the Federal Court held at page 8 as follows:

*%a **Palm Oil Research and Development Board Malaysia & Anor. v. Premium Vegetable Oils Sdn Bhd [2004] 2 CLJ 265, Gopal Sri Ram, JCA (as he then was) had occasion to state:***

'when construing a taxing or other statute, the sole function of the court is to discover the true intention of Parliament. In that process the court is under a duty to adopt an approach that produces neither injustice nor absurdity, i.e., an approach that promotes the purpose or object underlying the particular statute albeit that such purpose or object is not expressly set out therein.'+

Useful reference can also be made to the Finance Bill 2005 to ascertain the intention of Parliament when enacting sections 25(1A) and 32(1A) of the Act. Paragraphs 2 and 3 of the Explanatory Statement explained as follows:

%a Clause 5 seeks to amend section 25 of Act 53. New subsection (1A) is introduced so that the gross income in respect of any right to acquire shares in a company is taxed in the year where the right is exercised, assigned, released or acquired.

3. *Clause 6 seeks to introduce new subsection (1A) into section 32 of Act 53. The amendment seeks to provide the method to ascertain the gross income of a person from an employment in respect of any right to acquire shares in a company. The gross income shall consist of the market value of the shares at the time the right is exercisable or the market value at the time the right is exercised, whichever is the lower, less the amount paid for the shares.+*

27. From the above explanatory statements on the amendment to sections 25 and 32 of the Act, it clearly shows that the intention of introducing the provisions is to clarify the tax treatment on income from employment on any right to acquire shares in a company. From the explanatory statement it is also made clear that sections 25(1A) and 32(1A) of the Act do not apply to benefit or perquisite received by an employee by way of cash payment.

Conclusion

28. For the reasons abovestated we would answer the questions posed in this appeal as follows:

As regards Question 1, it is our decision that the RM1.00 payment made by the employee merely indicates the employee acceptance of the offer. It does not give the employee the right to acquire the shares as yet. The employees were only eligible to purchase the shares on the anniversary date in order to be the rightful owner of the shares. The employee cannot maintain

the offer to purchase the shares by reason of the takeover because Maxis has been delisted. There were no longer any shares to be offered. The employee does not have any right to purchase the shares before the anniversary date as the shares had yet to be vested in the employee.

As regards Question 2, we would answer it in the affirmative.

As regards Question 3, it is our decision that an employee who has an unvested option in ESOS has no right to acquire the shares before the anniversary date. Thus, the cash benefit received is not taxed in accordance with sections 25(1A) and 32(1A) of the Act, but instead, is taxable under section 25(1) of the Act.

We would accordingly dismiss this appeal with costs.

(ZULKEFLI BIN AHMAD MAKINUDIN)
Chief Judge of Malaya

Dated: 20 November 2014.

Counsel for the Appellant

Rishwant Singh, Gandhi Mohan Maniam.

Solicitors for the Appellant

Messrs. Zul Rafique & Partners.

Counsel for the Respondents

Hazlina Hussain, Ahmad Khairuddin, Muhammad Farid.

Solicitors for the Respondents

Inland Revenue Board of Malaysia