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CIVIL SERVICE

HOW TO ENTRENCH A PROFESSIONAL CIVIL SERVICE

Civil servants bounden duty is to stay loyal to the government of the day

WRITER Mark Twain once said, "Patriotism is supporting your country all the time and your government when it deserves it". A government duly elected by the people is deserving of our support and that of the civil service.

So, on June 10, at a gathering of civil servants in Air Keroh, Melaka, Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad reminded public servants yet again of their bounden duty to stay loyal to the government of the day. Whatever their political inclination, they are obliged to respect the decisions of the government.

Tempering his admonishment by appealing to their higher calling, Dr Mahathir explained that the civil service's *raison d'être* is service to the people and the country. As such, this service which should be done to the utmost for the nation's progress depends on how the civil service performs.

There is no smoke without fire. These repeated urgings even after one year of Pakatan Harapan rule suggest that something is amiss in the civil service. Or perhaps, these reminders are targeted at the vestigial recalcitrants. True, their position demands neutrality. However, after having served the previous coalition government for 61 years, some civil servants, particularly the junior ones, might have lost appreciation of this fundamental principle.

Here are five suggestions to entrench a professional civil service:

First, "Without a vision, the people perish", so goes a wise saying. The public service therefore requires a well-articulated vision statement replete with the values it stands for. The vision should be so compelling that it catalyses them to take the civil service and



A legislated civil-service code that enshrines the civil service's traditional independence, neutrality and conduct can help promote impartiality in the civil service. PIC BY MUHAMMAD ZUHAIRI ZUBER

the nation into the future. Undoubtedly, the public-service vision must take its cue from the national vision of becoming a roaring and inclusive economy. Taking a leaf from that vision, the vision for our civil service could be: "To become an excellent civil service that catapults Malaysia into the rank of a developed nation by 2023, supports the government we serve by delivering the objectives, and renders high quality services. In fulfilling these aspirations, our actions shall be underpinned by the values of integrity, impartiality and objectivity."

But vision alone is not enough. It must be regularly articulated. Civil servants should be constantly reminded of their bounden duty to serve the government of the day, whatever its shortcomings. Civil-service leaders have an obligation to engage in discourses with their subordinates on the noble values of the civil service and how their faithful adherence will ensure the civil service's pride of place in society. When such discussions take place frequently and fervently, we may see a quick end to partisanship.

Second, civil-service ethics should become a core component of the training curriculum early on in a civil servant's career. That way civil service neutrality gets instilled fairly early on in a civil

servant. He will then grow up in that ethos — that he is serving the public and serving the government of the day.

Third, the government should avoid the politicisation of senior appointments in the civil service. Such appointments should be made on merit and not for political expediency. A more meritocratic and diverse civil service, especially at the top, will also help in delivering the objectives of the government. Transfers and promotions should ensure that the right talent with the right values is seated in the right positions.

To also ensure this, promotion posts can be advertised within the civil service and the best candidates selected by a ministerial panel. Although this cannot totally eliminate subjectivity in selection, at least it will bring transparency and perhaps net the best person for the job. It might be pointless, however, to open these promotion posts to outsiders as the pay structure is unlikely to rake in top talent from the private sector.

Fourth, a legislated civil-service code that enshrines the civil service's traditional independence and neutrality, and conduct, can help promote impartiality in the civil service. Now, civil servants are unprotected from the whims and fancies of their ministers or aides. A code

enacted by an act of Parliament should offer civil servants greater protection from political interference.

As a *quid pro quo*, the code can also restrict a civil servant's right to join a political party. However, the latter may violate human rights. This could be overcome if a civil servant signs away this right to political association at the outset of his recruitment.

Fifth, as a demonstration of its impartiality, the government should revive past reforms that have contributed to the development of the nation. When PH came to power, some of these were sidelined. These include the national transformation programme, blue ocean strategy and civil service transformation.

It is understandable that PH wanted to make a clean break with the past. However, if there is any merit in those reforms, they should be reinstated, albeit in a version that suits the government's agenda. Such reinvigoration of worthy reforms will be a tremendous confidence booster to civil servants. They would be reassured that the government sees the big picture and is ready to work for the benefit of the rakyat regardless of whose ideas are being implemented.

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