

# Public service ran affairs of state by itself during political crisis



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**T**HE public service is the face of the government to its citizens, forming a palpable bond between them. It serves the government with all the loyalty that it can muster as it swore to do. Yet, the public service has long been a punching bag for many ills, as though it cannot do anything right.

Budget deficits are readily blamed on a bloated public service. Poor delivery of services must be because bureaucrats are apathetic. "Street-level" bureaucrats — the front-liners in service delivery — are sometimes accused of being little Napoleons

who subvert the intent of the law. If matters do not proceed to one's liking, it must be the work of the "deep state" within.

There is a grain of truth in the brickbats hurled at public servants. After all, a few rotten apples can spoil a bunch.

But what of bouquets of appreciation for the good done by them? Not that public servants need accolades to soldier on in a profession that they chose for its nobility than for its pay.

But "everyone likes a compliment", so wrote Abraham Lincoln to his friend, Thurlow Weed, in 1865, as Donald Phillips' 1992 book, *Lincoln on Leadership*, mentions. Such was the effect of Lincoln's compliments on others that it provided a strong motivational force in accomplishing their jobs.

So it must have been invigorating for the public service to have been complimented for running the affairs of the state by itself during the recent constitutional crisis. Additionally, one needs to appreciate the great contribution of the public service to

state- and nation-building.

In building up the state, the public service plans for development, proposes policies and executes them upon cabinet approval. It perseveres to create a business-friendly ecosystem to enhance a firm's competitiveness, thereby promoting economic growth.

Through the revenues from this growth, the public service promotes better standards of living for all. It builds vibrant public institutions so that they can hold the mighty to account. And it carries out the government's mandate with integrity.

On nation-building, the public service promotes racial harmony. Its common schooling helps foster a national identity. And as a microcosm of the larger society, the public service not only embodies societal values, it diffuses them across society. As Albert Schweitzer, a theologian and Nobel Prize-winner, once said: "There is no higher religion than human service."

Here are two suggestions to help the public service live up to

its high calling.

**FIRST**, a public servant should be accorded the due respect and trust by holders of political office. Public servants have institutional knowledge that ministers can profitably tap for better performance. Like our fingers to our hand, ministers and public servants are parts of the government.

Try brushing your teeth, eating, combing your hair, tying your shoelaces or even buttoning your shirt without your thumb. You will quickly grasp how an unnoticed little member of your body plays a significant role.

Lincoln said: "A house divided against itself cannot stand." This adage is so true of our political parties recently. But it equally applies to a minister-public servant relationship. Ministerial insensitivity to the workings and protocols of the public service can be counter-productive, leaving public servants disengaged and demoralised.

However, that does not mean ministers cannot be assertive. As Cinderella exhorts in the epony-

mous Disney movie: "Have courage and be kind. For where there is kindness, there is goodness, and where there is goodness, there is magic."

**SECOND**, the cabinet should enact a ministerial code of conduct. The code should outlaw any pressure on public servants in the execution of ministerial directive that would likely cause them to break the law. Recently, we read with sadness in the corruption trials how public servants were conflicted in executing a ministerial instruction that apparently violated departmental procedures.

We can empathise with public servants who are confronted with such a predicament. A ministerial code of conduct can help them to confront such dilemmas. It will protect public servants from any reprisal from their political master if they were unable to carry out the latter's directive as to do so would be unethical or, even worse, illegal.

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