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PM-Governments

C'WEALTH GOVERNMENTS - A COLLECTION OF CORRUPT OFFICIALS?

By: Salbiah Said

MALTA, April 22 (Bernama) -- One of the major challenges confronting Commonwealth nations in the next millenium is the belief among some in the developed nations that their governments are superfluous -- being merely a collection of corrupt officials, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

He said there was also a notion that Commonwealth governments comprised politicians who acted as impediments to the freedom of the people.

In his keynote address at the Commonwealth Association for Public Administration and Management's (CAPAM) biennial conference at the St. Gorg Corintiija here, he said that as such in the last few decades, they (developed nations which hold this notion) had been busy paring the authority of the government.

This they did by breaking up the administrative machinery into conflicting centres of authority, he said at the four-day conference attended by members from 51 member countries. Malta Prime Minister Dr Endward Fenech-Adami opened the conference.

"Thus, the authority of the president for example is negated by the authority of the legislatures diminished by the courts' powers of judicial review, even when the people elect the president and the members of the legislative, they refuse to trust the leaders of government that they themselves have chosen."

Another major challenge is the emergence of new centres of power -- the non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Just about anybody can set himself up as an NGO and he will have a powerful influence over governmental affairs even if he represents nobody but himself.

"There can be literally hundreds of NGOs who must be listened to. The time of the administrators must be taken up dealing with NGOs, their protests and often their violent opposition," Dr Mahathir said.

On top of all these is the press, now reffered to as the media, the people in between, the interpreters.

Dr Mahathir said no one would dispute the need for a free press, but freedom was gauged by the strength of the media's opposition to the government in power.

"The media is not considered to be free unless it is unequivocally against the government, and the effect is to force the media to undermine the government, its authority and its programmes.

Even if the government does good or succeeds in carrying out a programme, the media highlights only the negative aspects of these in order to prove that it is free. That this in itself reflects its own lack of freedom does not seem to be appreciated by the press.

"That it is also not free from control of the owners or the editors or the journalists and their pet prejudices is deliberately ignored."

With all these forces ranged against the government, he said, it was almost impossible for the government to function effectively and to lead the nation. "Perhaps, an emasculated government such as this is good for developed countries of the west."

A government without authority, and the means to apply, if not enforce, that authority in a developing country would be disastrous.

The country will not only be unable to develop but it will not even be stable. This may lead to anarchy and people will suffer.

"If you look at a number of developing countries where the governments

are weak, you will realise why these countries just cannot make any progress, (and) of course, they are lauded for being democratic, but anarchic democracies are not better than any other anarchy. The People lose their freedom."

Malaysia believed in democracy but not in anarchy, and democracy was not intended to result in a government unable to govern, he said.

The government, he said, must rule the country, and it must lead and it must be effective. It must have objectives other than merely the maintenance of law and order.

A developing country, he said, must develop and it was the duty and responsibility of the government to develop it.

"While the government should not be authoritarian, should not trample on the rights of the citizens, neither should the citizens disregard and negate the rights and authority of the government to govern.

If the government fails, then it should be brought down democratically, that is through the same door that it came in, through the ballot box. Overthrowing it in any other way must be regarded as undemocratic and eschewed. Those who overthrow the government by other means must accept being overthrown by the same means when they become the government.

To implement the policies and programmes of the elected government, an effective administrative machinery was essential, which must be structured carefully to enable it to carry out the decisions of the elected government, Dr Mahathir said.

To develop a country and to manage its finances, he said the administration must know and understand the decisions and the directives of the elected governing body - the Cabinet.

Effective communication between the Cabinet and the top officers of the administration must exist, as far too often, the interpretation of sentence condensation of Cabinet decision was not adequate, he said.

"Not having heard the debate preceding the decision, the administrators may well disagree with the decision or interpret it wrongly, and the end result must be an ineffective and an unsuccessful administration and government."

In Malaysia, post Cabinet meetings, presided over by the ministers concerned, allowed Cabinet decisions to be fully explained to the administrators, he said.

The latter can ask for clarification or even disagree at this stage, and the minister will have to explain. In the process, there emerges a greater understanding of the decisions made, and implementation will be more precise and positive, in accord with Cabinet's decision.

"But wrong interpretations can also take place at lower levels. Effective communication is also necessary all down the line of command. Each and every individual in the administration must know exactly the workflow chart, his own position and responsibility according to the chart and the part of the work that must be carried out."

Dr Mahathir also spoke of socialism and communism, which after some 70 years, it was discovered that the government received practically no profit from government-owned enterprises.

Not only was government management not profit-motivated, their workers refused to work hard because there were no incentives. On the other hand, workers still went on strike in government-owned companies to demand more pay despite the lack of profit.

With only workers to buy the products, the domestic market was poor, and so, the communist and the socialist systems of government ownership of the means of production, were now in disrepute.

Where once nationalisation was the catchword, today one hears everywhere the new catchword - privatisation.

For privatisation to succeed, cooperation from the civil servants was essential, he said. They must be prepared to reexamine their roles and their way of doing things. They have to put the interest of the private sector above those of the bureaucracy.

Bureaucratic impediments must be removed, and they must ensure that the privatised entities must succeed where they - the bureaucracy - may have failed before.

This, Dr Mahathir said, was not something that anyone did gladly. Civil servants are often reluctant to cooperate in making their former arch rival successful, and yet, that is what it takes to make privatisation work.

"Why should the civil servants cooperate with the private sector, particularly with the agencies which were once run by them but are now in private hands?" he asked.

The answer is simple, it pays to do so, to help the private sector succeed and make profits. The government collects taxes from the people in order to finance the administration; to pay the salaries of civil servants.

If the private sector makes no money, taxes cannot be collected. On the other hand when the private sector is doing well, tax collection in every form, in particular corporate tax, will be big. Big revenues collected by the government influence the remuneration of the civil service and so by helping the private sector to prosper, the civil servants are actually helping themselves.

The civil service, he said, has to adjust, to acquire expertise in economics and trade and trade practices, even master an entirely new jargon. Failure to do so would make the civil service ineffective or even irrelevant, he said.

"The past attitude towards business had to change also, and the civil service must be business-friendly, facilitating trade between nations through negotiating favourable terms and conditions for trade."

Quality too, he said, became a much sought-after target. If goods produced must meet certain quality standards and services, government services included must achieve a certain degree of quality.

ISO 9000, he said, should not be for factories of the private sector alone and government administration must also vie for the coveted award.

A good administrator, he said, cannot be of a lower quality than its clients

- largely the private sector. It must complement the private sector fully if it is going to serve the country and contribute towards its growth and the well-being of the people.

Dr Mahathir said it was clear that present-day administrators need to change and adjust not once, but again and again, and that new structures need to be set up even as administration is downsized.

The reorientation can be disruptive and unsettling at times, but failure to take cognizance of these needs and failure to devise the right structures and methods would surely result in ineffective governments and the failure of the nation. -- BERNAMA

SS YBY