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Rising to the challenge

WHEN the Seventh Malaysia Plan was launched last May, a significant reaction is that one of the most important issues pertaining to the plan is whether the civil service has the ability to deliver. It is observed that for the Plan to be effectively implemented, priority must be given to reorganising the civil service. The private sector cannot respond to the call to be the engine of growth without the support of the civil service. That remark is not a new suggestion but it does succinctly sum up the expectation of the private sector and its fear that the more than 800,000 civil servants may not rise to the challenge.

Perhaps, no other Malaysian leader is more acutely aware of the need to have a competent civil service for effective implementation of the nation's development than Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad. From Day One when he assumed the premiership 15 years ago, Malaysians enthusiastically welcomed his Leadership by Example and the motto to be adopted by the civil service "Bersih, Cekap, Amanah" (Clean, Efficient, Trustworthy). To the long-suffering citizenry who despaired over the inefficient counter services, the new measures were indeed a breath of fresh air. The decade-old Malaysia Incorporated Concept laying the foundation for the public and private sectors to work hand in hand for the nation's advancement is another landmark of his administration.

But habits do die hard. Dr Mahathir, who is never short on reminders to the nation to shape up, delivered yet another on Monday. Stating that all organisations, irrespective of size or sector, should think "global" and aim at producing goods and services which meet international standards, his message is that the performance hitherto, just to meet the national needs, no longer suffices. With the liberalisation of the world trading system, it is imperative that we, as a significant trading nation, be not only productive but also competitive. Up-to-the-mark quality service has to be the order of the day if we want to continue to advance.

The unveiling of the ambitious plan for the public sector to achieve the ISO 9000 standard is, as expected, greeted with not a little scepticism. That it is a tall order for the civil service judging by the present performance and will be bound to raise public expectations, is a widely-held view. But we should be positive and not allow negativism to drag us down. It is by constantly telling ourselves "Malaysia Boleh", an impetus given by Dr Mahathir, that we have arrived at this stage of development where Malaysia is a model to many developing nations. Of course, there is a lot of room for improvement and the private sector will certainly like to see things move faster than the present pace.

In outlining an "eight-milestone" plan for the achievement of the international standard by the year 2000 on Monday, the authorities described it as "among the most important steps taken by the Government to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of all its agencies". The milestones, including focusing on dealing with the root cause of problems, continuous critical examination of procedures and corrective measures, are impressive. We now have the vision charter and clear objectives of what we want of our civil service. It is incumbent upon the civil service, which owes a duty of care to the citizenry, to rise to the great challenge of attaining the goals. The people, too, have a vital role in encouraging as well as monitoring.

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