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## An apolitical civil service

IT is with good reason that Chief Secretary to the Government, Tan Sri Abdul Halim Ali, reiterates the need for civil servants to be impartial and not to allow politics to interfere with their duty.

This reminder is of particular importance in the wake of recent political events. According to Halim, there is evidence of attempts by some groups to undermine the Government and divide the civil service by spreading malicious rumours about the Government, circulating false government documents and influencing civil servants to join anti-government movements. Perhaps much of this stems from the mistaken belief that personalities, and not the substance or continuation of policies, can bring good to the country. But to the credit of the civil service, it has not succumbed to this ploy.

Halim's directive is built on the premise that being apolitical is essential to maintain integrity in the Government itself. It has been the tradition of the British civil service, a tradition which we have inherited, for the civil servants to be non-partisan and to give impartial advice and implement the policies laid down by the Government of the day. This has served the country well and any violation will only be to the detriment of the public whose interests the civil service must give overriding priority.

Thus, any "unofficial" nexus between high-level bureaucrats and politicians will cast shadows of impropriety on the administration. There should be no occasion for any interference by influential individuals, including Ministers, in the operations of government departments and agencies outside their jurisdiction.

A divided bureaucracy is an ineffective one. A divide that is deliberately designed on political configurations cannot have but dangerous consequences - policies will not be implemented, contradictory statements will be issued and worse, things may grind to a halt. Indeed, it does not portend well for the country if the civil service pulls in different directions. As Halim said, the implications of friction among civil servants are very serious since it may influence their performance and thus, weaken the civil service.

The civil service must conform to the injunction that the Government exists for the people to serve the people's interests. And its employees discharge their duties as servants of the public. They must ensure that the running of the country is done in a way which invites and retains public trust in the civil service and ultimately, in the Government.

The independence of the civil service is integral to the stability of the country. As the backbone of the country, its services are indispensable to development irrespective of changes to the political landscape. Thus, Halim's directive to the departments and agencies that their priority is to help the Government revive the economy and forget all other matters, including political differences, is timely.

As previously pointed out by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, the bureaucrats cannot operate at the current pace. The present economic downturn requires an agility in doing things. Red-tape should be reduced particularly in those matters which are urgently needed to expedite economic recovery. Civil servants must bear in mind that accountability is about minimising grievances and delays. Efficiency will help to reduce costs for the bureaucrats as well as for the parties

requiring the services.

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