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Under pressure to perform

LOCAL councils, Malaysia's third-tier government, have the unfortunate label of being lackadaisical and incompetent. While it is unfair to paint all 144 of them black, the mounting complaints against these authorities through the years have contributed to the poor image.

But times are fast changing. The Federal Government recognises the need to revamp these organisations to streamline operations. In this information technology era, bringing with it an increasingly well-informed public and inevitably rising expectations, gone are the days when those serving the people could afford to take it easy. For those who continue to ignore moral suasions, which have of late grown into warnings, it will be a matter of time before their incompetence catches up with them.

The writing is on the wall. While Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's strong statement some 10 days ago on the urgent need for the civil service to pull up its socks is seen as a much-needed push, the signs for change are clear. This is particularly true for local authorities, primarily because of the rapidly-changing world around us and the growing impact of "people's power". The Federal Government's revelation last week that more than 60 per cent of the complaints received by the Public Complaints Bureau were about government officers' delays in discharging their duties does not come as a surprise.

Undoubtedly, the worst part in the public's dealings with the local authorities is the "respond time". In the absence of time-frames, there is no telling when their applications will be approved. Dr Mahathir hit the nail on the head when he said: "Time means money." Ultimately, delays mean more costs and the undesirable consequence of the entrepreneurs passing these to the consumers. The cause-and-effect factor cannot be ignored.

Although local council chiefs are appointed, it is obvious that such appointees have to put their shoulders to the wheel. While their performance will not be judged by the ballot box, their ratepayers are the judges and daily reports in the print media show that they have little tolerance for not up-to-the-mark performance. Thus, the mission statements of new municipal presidents and mayors are being closely scrutinised and their actions evaluated. Among the commendable statements is one made by the new Ampang Jaya Municipal Council president Mohamad Nik soon after he assumed office early this month. Pledging to improve services to residents and increase the efficiency of his staff, he said one of his priorities would be to reduce the number of complaints against the council. "Since service to residents is our core business, it is only right to give the best," he said. Of course, the new chief's performance will be monitored, especially after saying all the right things.

It will not be fair if we do not mention the exemplary local councils in our midst. One fine example is Kuantan. Often, we hear of non-locals heaping kudos on Pahang's State capital. "Do you know that its backlanes are cleaner than some of Kuala Lumpur's streets?" a Klang Valley businessman who has an office there tells his friend in discussing the cleanliness of our local authorities. The town has a string of national and international awards for its quality management and service, including the ISO 9001. It has the distinction of being Malaysia's first local authority and the world's second to achieve such a standard. Johor's Pasir Gudang local authority has also attained a high level of performance and duly awarded the ISO 9002.

It is heartening to hear of those local councils which are already setting a good example in their service, speak humbly of the need to do even better. If only there are more such authorities, then our lives will be easier, has been the people's constant hope. Indisputably, the pressure is on the local councils to bring about faster services, better living conditions, surroundings and environment for all.

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