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## Challenging times ahead for Cuepacs

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N. SIVA SUBRAMANIAM, 51, took over as president of Cuepacs, or Congress of Unions of Employees in the Public and Civil Services, with his victory at the triennial conference-cum-polls last month. His rise, though, comes at an extremely challenging time.

That Siva and Cuepacs have an enormous task ahead was underlined by the surprisingly candid plea of former president Abdul Aziz Sultan at the conference: "I hope something is done urgently to overcome the many weaknesses of Cuepacs."

Cuepacs' tale of woes begins with a palpable lack of interest. For starters, only 20 per cent of the 850,000-member strong civil service are unionised, which, a former president said, was an "embarrassment".

Even then trade unionists often lament, not without a strong hint of resignation, over membership's indifference to what goes on in their unions. Except on such occasions as salary revisions or leadership contests, they just stay away.

But it has been argued that members must inevitably take an interest as it is they who will shape the future of the organisation. "For instance, with all the changes around us, Cuepacs cannot remain solely as a wage negotiator," said T. Narendran, its longest-serving president.

Siva himself readily acknowledges the need to veer from this traditional role. "Cuepacs must not be seen as an organisation that only wakes up a few weeks in five years to talk, among others, about salary negotiations. We risk losing support of the members," said Siva last week.

Beyond this question of identity and role, Siva, who was previously secretary-general, should be familiar with other headaches, especially its finances.

This stems essentially from what has been described as a "shamefully low" subscription which works out to between 15 sen and RM1.80 per member. The rate has remained for 24 long years.

The financial woes even brought the Government into the picture once. Past president Mohamad Mat Jid considered Cuepacs fortunate for this rescue.

A chorus is reverberating therefore for members to pay more to raise Cuepacs' effectiveness and so that there can be more workshops and seminars.

"Cuepacs can do much like getting group insurance for its members. But this can only be done if there is support from members," said Narendran who was impressed by the standing of the National Union of Bank Employees. (NUBE is regarded as the richest union in the country.)

Besides its finances, Cuepacs has to deal with a gamut of other issues from reforming day-to-day management to organising educational workshops.

Indeed, Siva will have to move fast to revitalise Cuepacs which is being likened by some to an old, slow vehicle hogging the fast lane after turning 38 two months ago.

In stressing the need for reforms, trade unionists acknowledge that Cuepacs was formed partly to improve the workings of its 103 affiliated trade unions, and to talk to the Government.

Against this backdrop, can a different course be steered and how can Siva star in the exercise?

Trade unionists say Cuepacs can start doing this by taking Information Technology seriously.

"Imagine with just a stroke of the computer an economy can be knocked down. Thousands then get retrenched," said former president A. Ragunathan.

Sharing similar sentiments for change, Abdul Aziz said: "To me, Cuepacs has to be run by a full-time secretariat while plenty of research must be done."

As for research (an observer said everytime trade unionists talk about improvement, research will feature prominently) it will certainly help enhance the standing of Cuepacs among members and those they deal with. And they have much dealing with the Government.

Which is why trade unionists said Cuepacs must come up with rational and sensible arguments to justify their claims, an issue also raised by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad when opening Cuepacs' 21st triennial general assembly on Dec 2.

The soft-spoken Siva said the new leadership would organise more programmes to enhance members' knowledge on contemporary issues such as IT.

Which shows that so far when they envisage the future of this important organisation, trade unionists could only offer bits and pieces. "There is no clear, comprehensive blueprint .. still, encouragingly ideas have been bandied about," said an observer.

All these provide a compelling argument for Cuepacs to get together and chart its future now.

For some of the issues can be safely anticipated - when they meet the Government next for wage talks, the economy could have recovered. Chances are that they will again be talking about salary disparity between the private and public sectors.

And, there must be new credible armoury when they raise the matter again.

For this, further improvements in efficiency and quality service to the public will help. "Cuepacs can motivate members to raise efficiency and competency .. this is a powerful justification for improvements in their terms and conditions," said an observer.

As partners in progress, even the nature of future civil service should be a concern to Cuepacs considering advances like the advent of electronic government.

In discussing its future, Ragunathan - the fourth president - took time to reminisce the difficulties and opposition founders like him went through when they wanted to register Cuepacs in November 1960.

For this reason, he had this message for current and future leaderships of Cuepacs: "Please take great care of Cuepacs."

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