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Civil servants must prove worthy of getting bonuses

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RETAILERS, big and small, are heaving a huge collective sigh of relief, the developers are again seeing their houses and apartments being snapped up, and major corporations are returning to billion-ringgit profitability. And for the wage-earners or self-employed, the belt has been loosened a notch or two.

One after another, signs of economic recovery have emerged, and the country is now expected to post a gross domestic product growth for 1999 of well over the 1 per cent conservatively predicted by the Government. The Government's financial position has also improved sufficiently to allow it to reverse an earlier decision to freeze all recruitment and reinstate various allowances for senior civil servants and police officers which were cut in January last year.

The Government had also approved a RM1 million allocation for some 240,000 Rela members as an appreciation for their contribution and sacrifice.

Such is the improved economic circumstances that unions in the public sector have been prompted to ask the Government for a minimum annual bonus of RM1,000 to be paid to their members at the end of the year.

The umbrella body for the public service unions, the Congress of Unions of Employees in the Public and Civil Services (Cuepacs) is proposing that a RM1,000 bonus be offered to those earning less than RM1,000 a month and a month's bonus for those drawing more.

Cuepacs argues that the "reward" for the public sector workers would contribute to further economic recovery in view of the consequent increase in consumption.

Its president, Mr N. Siva Subramaniam, believes that most of the government staff can be expected to spend their bonus on their children's books and clothings and to meet other family and personal needs.

As funding has been made available for small entrepreneurs with the aim of stimulating overall domestic economic activities, the bonus for civil servants will further this cause by helping to boost demand, he said.

Companies have emerged from the economic downturn leaner, trimmer and better-managed but there has also been a general increase in the cost of living. Wage earners would find that their take-home pay does not buy as many things as before.

The union's plea deserves consideration, not least given that there are low-ranking civil servants currently earning as little as RM400 a month - hardly sufficient for a single person living in the city.

The question is whether the Government can afford to make the payout to its more than 800,000 employees.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, when asked about Cuepacs' request, said the Government would consider it.

"If we can afford, why not. If we cannot afford, I hope that people don't resort to industrial action because that is very damaging," he said on his return from Zimbabwe yesterday.

Most government officers are now looking forward to the unveiling of the Budget 2000 at the end of this month, in the hope that like in the Budget 1997 there would be pleasant news for them.

A one-month bonus for civil servants with a minimum payment of RM700 was announced then, and paid out before the end of 1996. It had cost the Government RM1 billion.

This time, the Prime Minister has indicated that the Government will present a "recovery budget" to consolidate the gains made over the past 12 months.

It will determine the direction of the Malaysian economy in the next century, and put to further test the Government's policies in restoring economic dynamism in the country.

Civil servants should therefore take heed of Dr Mahathir's advice not to take matters into their own hands if the Government finds that it really cannot afford to pay the bonus.

Unlike in other countries, the Malaysian Government has repeatedly shown it is always open to discussion and the Prime Minister never shuts his door on the unions. Rest assured, the Government has its workers at heart, and that of the entire nation as well.

On their part, civil servants must prove to the Government and the public who are paying their salaries through taxes that they deserve the bonus.

Deliver the best service and help to expedite economic recovery, and no one will begrudge the reward, which is what a bonus is supposed to be, an incentive to work even harder.

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