

18/02/1999

Deputy Prime Minister should hold unenviable job of Home Minister

Harun Hashim

WHEN Deputy Prime Minister and Home Affairs Minister, Tan Sri Musa Hitam, resigned from the Government in the mid 1980s, the Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad took over the Home Ministry.

He held this position since then until the recent Cabinet reshuffle.

This was a heavy responsibility for the Prime Minister and not the most desirable arrangement.

A Prime Minister should not be burdened with the day to day business of another ministry. It is like a ship's captain having to mind the engine room at the same time.

The appointment of Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi as Deputy Prime Minister and concurrently as Minister of Home Affairs is therefore most welcome and timely.

In effect it is the restoration of good governance during the early years of the Mahathir administration.

In the context of Malaysian politics, an MP who is appointed Deputy Prime Minister has arrived, politically speaking, in the sense that he does not have to spend much time and effort to gain further political mileage, more so when the DPM is also the Home Minister.

The departments under the Home Minister do not open avenues to sustain a patronage culture for political mileage.

The responsibilities at the Home Ministry are politically sensitive.

Indeed an aspiring politician on the rise, with a keen eye on the popularity stakes would not want to be Home Minister.

The departments under the Home Ministry include the Police, the Prisons Department, the Immigration Department, the National Registration Department and the Registrar of Societies.

These are all very well established departments whose main functions are law enforcement and they form the backup of the country's political system.

None of these are vote catchers. That is why the Home Ministry should be assigned to the DPM.

The primary function of any government is the maintenance of law and order. The Police bear the brunt of this responsibility.

From recent events Abdullah has much image restoration work to do particularly with Malaysia's long reputation of having a police force which serves the public and is a friend of the people.

It does not have a history anywhere near Nazi Germany's Gestapo, the Japanese Kempetai, the Soviet Union's KGB or even the Shah of Iran's Savak.

We have never really been a police state even at the worst of times.

The power of the Government to detain people without trial should be applied in strict compliance with the law and should never be abused, certainly not for any political agenda.

The Minister should personally exercise such power.

A deputy minister should be assigned with the responsibility for the prisons, and to especially visit every prison at least once a year to ensure that the inmates are treated fairly.

We should maintain our reputation of a sound penal system in having the lowest rate of recidivism in the world.

Efforts are being made to improve the Immigration Service. Its officers should be polite but firm when performing their duties. The current

exercise to be on line with all entry and exist points should be expedited.

Tourists, businessmen and even members of the foreign Press are important life-lines of the country's economy, but national security and interests should never be compromised.

One of the functions of the National Registration Department is to grant citizenship status. This exercise should be a solemn affair.

Perhaps the laws should make it mandatory for all new citizens to take the Oath of Allegiance before a Sessions court Judge in open court and the citizenship certificate presented at the ceremony to make the acquisition of citizenship more meaningful.

One of the most sensitive and sometimes politically explosive situations concern the registration of new political parties.

We subscribe to a multiple political party system. Applications for registration should therefore be expeditiously dealt with to dispel any allegation of suppression by the Government of political opposition.

The new Home Minister has much to do. To his credit he has begun to address the problems of his ministry soon after assuming office. The task is not enviable.

Any wonder why politicians do not want the job! From now on it should be an established tradition of the Government that the Home Affairs portfolio be held by the Deputy Prime Minister.

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