

26/12/1999

Perform or perish

THE directive by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohammad on work ethics for the Cabinet, encompassing 13 aspects of ministerial responsibility and 14 points related to ethics, acts as a catalyst for integrity and responsible political behaviour within the executive. At its core lies the essence of good governance - honesty, efficiency, trustworthiness, transparency and accountability.

Clearly, Dr Mahathir believes that building good governance must be done from the focal point of cultivating excellent leadership at the highest echelons. Ministers must discharge their duties with collective responsibility, loyalty, efficiency and dedication. They must exercise ministerial power fairly in the honest pursuit of proper governmental outcomes and account publicly for their actions.

Administrative shortcomings can be avoided if Ministers observe a procedure manual to ensure work is effectively and swiftly done without compromising any procedure.

They must establish productive relations with their staff and accept full responsibility for the way in which the departments in the ministries meet their goals and objectives.

Apart from the Quality Control Circles to better serve the people, there should be an efficiency audit headed by the Prime Minister on the performance of Ministers. Those who fail to achieve a minimum standard of competence deserve censure.

The lines of accountability for the actions under the authority of Ministers should run from officials to Minister to Cabinet to Parliament and, finally, to the rakyat without any short cuts. This is crucial as public accountability is an irreducible pre-requisite for a responsible and responsive Government.

Doubtless, the directive on ethics will force moral probity on Ministers. One of the points on ethics prohibits any links with family businesses and compels disclosure of interest in discussions about these businesses upon which they must leave the Cabinet meeting. But disclosure should also be made on close, personal associations with businessmen and it would be up to the Prime Minister to decide whether the presence of the Minister concerned in the meeting would be detrimental to the Cabinet's integrity. This will eliminate wild accusations about political patronage.

The directive will prevent Ministers from elevating personal gain over their constitutional obligation to act in public interest. A Cabinet post is not a milch cow for the suckling of lucre. There should not be the slightest shadow of doubt over Ministers' conduct lest the Cabinet be perceived as the harlot's privilege. Rooting out corruption is essential since this is the only way the Government can continue to enjoy the people's trust. But the people, too, must not easily fall prey to baseless rumours about venal politicians. The habit of expecting politicians to deliver favours begins with the people themselves.

By letting greater transparency into its innards, the Government is re-asserting itself as a platform responsive to the people's demands. Much depends on how the directive is enforced. Those guilty of lapses must be disciplined. We hope the directive will not be swept off course by a fickle tide of committment which is long on passion but short on action. It must not be reduced to mere political gimmickry. Politicians, especially Ministers, should not merely be like any of us. To lead, they

must be better.

(END)