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Legitimate criticism can only enrich an impartial civil service

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COME the general election, every wakil rakyat faces the people and some may lose the battle to save their seat but the civil service remains intact.

The public administration that Malaysia inherited from the British colonialists ensures that senior civil servants stay in their posts to allow continuity, a smooth transition of political power and to avoid disruption to the management of the country.

Too bad we also inherited the British fondness for bureaucracy, though in all fairness, the current administration has shredded much of the long-winded red tape over the years.

If ever the Opposition takes over from the Barisan Nasional, it can be assured of a viable civil service and not one that has to be built on uncertainty or chaos.

Bearing that in mind, the British civil service architecture and network was the only concept that the Americans admired about their former rulers.

Each time they have a new president, everyone from the Attorney-General to top-ranking officers running the civil service is replaced systematically.

The new president nominates a candidate for the various senior ranking posts, which is of course subject to confirmation by Congress and the Senate.

The Americans have the view that a presidency shapes the administration, so it is likely that the President would want his own men and women in the senior civil service ranks, people who can adapt to his school of thought.

But in Malaysia, postings of top-ranking civil servants are decided by the Chief Secretary to the Government who gets to appoint a secretary-general of a ministry and influence the posting of a department director-general.

Of course, the Chief Secretary's post is decided by the Government of the day although there has never been any controversy as to who becomes Chief Secretary.

Due to Malaysia's political stability, the civil service has never had to go through what detractors would call a "witch-hunt" to purge "loyalists" of the previous government.

It is unfortunate that Terengganu had to endure a major disruption in its civil service, from the replacement of the State Secretary to other senior ranking posts. But this is to be expected.

Which brings us to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's advice to civil servants on Thursday to remain non-partisan when carrying out their duties.

While it is not a complex plea, its practice is something else.

While Dr Mahathir went to great lengths to stress that his reminder was not to mean that civil servants must only support the BN, it has to be said that the civil service, while being a machinery for the Government of the day, can never gag or contain the political sentiments of its members.

This is a fact that Dr Mahathir recognises, an act which complies with the demands of the Constitution.

Of course, his critics, and there are many of them out there, would think otherwise, contending that the Prime Minister was attempting to lasso the civil service into subserviency.

Experience has shown that as much as civil servants must not work to the

detriment of the service, their political alignments are as free as a bird.

The Nov 29 election last year proved just how free civil servants were with their votes.

It doesn't matter if they are sympathetic to Pas or the DAP or even to sacked Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim - their primary loyalty, at least in the form of their deeds, is to the Government of the day and this cannot be over-emphasised.

What they do in their spare time - attending Opposition talks or lobbying for its leaders or working for non-governmental organisations critical of the Government - or with their election ballots, is their private business.

But it is not all right if they pass over government files or confidential information to unauthorised people, even to politicians aligned to the ruling party.

This not only amounts to disloyalty but also corruption.

Civil servants must remember that their deeds should never compromise or sabotage the service which still gets its directives from the Cabinet.

Then comes the million ringgit question: Is it possible to espouse critical sentiments against the Government of the day and yet remain effective and loyal within the civil service? In a nutshell, civil servants have no choice.

The alternative is simple: Get out of the service. Otherwise, abide by the General Orders and take the directive just like everyone else.

Let it be said that a civil servant who refuses to abide by this simple concept of loyalty while still in the service is as bad as a wolf in sheep's clothing, to quote a well-worn cliché.

To be fair, nobody in the civil service brass, not even the Chief Secretary to the Government, should denounce criticisms from subordinates, especially if it comes from the trade unions, as an act of disloyalty.

Cuepacs, the body that represents all non-executive employees, has been very critical of senior ranking officers, even disagreeing with Ministers and to a certain extent, the Prime Minister.

But that does not make Cuepacs disloyal or disruptive to the service. On the contrary, the service has been the better for it.

The top brass must accept that criticism, if constructive or designed to deflate hype or expose discrepancies, must be embraced if efficiency and improvement in the service are to be enhanced.

Even the Prime Minister recognises that criticism, even the cruel ones, if taken positively as he has done in his 19 years as Prime Minister, is good for the soul, or as a bouncing board for ideas, or better still, to generate a vision.

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