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The powerful faceless civil servants

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IT IS said that the civil service of any nation is the most influential of all state institutions, wielding hidden power. This is certainly true of the British Civil Service and I believe it is also the case with the Malaysian Civil Service (now known as the Administrative and Diplomatic Civil Service).

It is, like the British Civil Service, "the permanent government" of Malaya or Malaysia. Politicians should read various books on British civil servants by Peter Hennessy and see true situation comedies of the "Yes Minister" and "Yes Prime Minister" BBC television series. The Chief Secretary to the Government, who is also the Cabinet Secretary, is an all-powerful civil servant. He can, via his officers, speed up or hinder any implementation of government decisions.

Field Marshal Tun Gerald Templer, the man who reversed the tide of war against the Malayan Communist Party and set Malaya on the road to Merdeka, had this to say about an expatriate Chief Secretary of Malaya, who had been described by his peers as the most brilliant man in the service (Malayan Civil Service). Templer said, "I've tried to induce him, without giving him an actual order, to ease himself out of the Chief Secretary's chair and do his packing, but he still hangs around, talking interminably. I personally could never have stood him as Chief Secretary in spite of his knowledge".

Templer found Sir Vincent Del Tufo a bore and complained about him to the Colonial Secretary, Oliver Lyttleton, and congratulated himself when Del Tufo was replaced (with full honours) by Sir David Watherston, the Secretary of Defence.

I have personally known all the Malaysian Chief Secretaries since Independence, some very well, having worked very closely with them when I was holding various posts in the Prime Minister's office (1963-1976). They were a mixed bunch. Two or three were remarkable.

Tan Sri Abdul Halim Ali, the tenth Chief Secretary, a contemporary of mine, rightly said the General Orders (Conduct and Discipline) 1993 prohibit civil service officers in key positions in management and professional groups from taking part in active politics. The ruling is still in effect, and he has categorically stated that it was not a good thing to allow senior civil servants to be involved in politics. I entirely agree with Halim. The Umno General Assembly last week amended its constitution to enable senior civil servants to join Umno.

A lesson in history, I believe, is not out of order. Umno was founded on 11 May, 1946 essentially by Malay civil servants, teachers, and politically conscious Malays united in a new nationalism to oppose the British decision to turn Malaya into a British colony.

Umno founding President, Datuk Sir Onn Jaafar, was a Johor civil servant. In 1949, the Malayan Chinese Association was founded by Datuk Sir Tan Cheng Lock to counterbalance Umno with the obvious blessing of the British and also to help fight the Malayan Communist Party.

Fifty four years on, things have drastically changed and are changing. The Malays are now dangerously divided as evident by the 1999 general election results. Lunas will be yet another manifestation. It has been suggested that Tun Razak, had he lived, would have been able to keep PAS within the Barisan Nasional (BN).

PAS was kicked out of BN by Tun Razak's successor, Datuk Hussein Onn in

1977.

Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra, Tun Razak, Datuk Hussein Onn and Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad have all been in the civil service. Tunku (Legal), Razak (MCS), Hussein (Malay Administrative Service) and Dr Mahathir (Medical Service).

In Australia, civil servants are allowed to become members of political parties and many do. But we are a developing country and I believe it is incumbent that our civil service remains non-political and neutral.

Any civil servant who wants to go into politics should resign. A political civil service has greater capacity to do more harm than an apolitical one which is already demoralised and working under stress and considerable apathy.

I have spoken to many friends in the civil service who say they do not like to do things and be cursed (undeservedly) by the public or foreign investors. They would prefer that they curse at someone else. I also know that some civil servants like to undermine decisions they disagree with, and not a few put all sorts of obstacles to delay things for personal, political or, as they claim, "in the national interest."

All this occurs when the General Orders (Conducts and Discipline 1963) are in force. Imagine what the civil service will degenerate to if the General Orders were further diminished.

Civil servants should stick to being good public servants and neither be "Tuan" nor politicians. I must caution the new Umno leaders, especially the ambitious and inexperienced ones, that once virtually all Malay civil servants were Umno supporters or sympathisers.

There was no need for the party to canvass them. Their support was automatic.

Why is it no longer so? That should be their main concern.

Halim stated and I can tell you this, that once senior officers are allowed to become members of political parties, don't be shocked that if not a few will opt for opposition parties.

There is no guarantee they will automatically join the ruling party. Some Umno leaders want the General Orders relaxed because they wrongly believe, as in many other instances, that "thinking Malays" always believe and follow them. How wrong they have been and continue to be.

The Malaysian Administrative and Diplomatic Service is the oldest, biggest and I think the costliest and most influential of all government institutions wielding concealed power.

I had to deal with this powerful group intimately for fourteen years and I watched successive Chief Secretaries and Permanent Secretaries (now Secretaries-General), largely faceless, who formed and make up the hidden element of the government before and after Merdeka.

I have observed how successive governments have failed to shrink its size, tame or tighten their grip on this powerful group.

Before the General Orders and other rules are relaxed or withdrawn, do ponder about the future. We must conduct a no holds barred and objective inquiry and act upon its findings on how we came to be where we are now.

There are two choices before us: First, as John Adams said 226 years ago, the happiness of the people is the sole end of the government, so their consent is the only foundation of it. The second is that the Government should be very effective in controlling its opponents.

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