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Fine tuning the civil service is vital

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ONE is often confronted by Press reports that secretaries-general of ministries and directors-general of departments should not be table-bound. They should visit the organisations under their jurisdiction to ensure that policies are implemented with speed and despatch and delays are eliminated.

An even more basic concern is to ensure that the objectives of any policy that is implemented are realised, and that if problems arise they are immediately identified and remedial action taken.

Secretaries-general and directors-general no longer work in isolation but are in a symbiotic relationship with the organisations under their jurisdiction.

This is because in the Malaysian administrative culture there are built-in systems that provide for close and constant interaction. This is a healthy and positive development.

Starting from the top there is the post-Cabinet briefing every Wednesday afternoon where the minister briefs the secretary-general and heads of department on what transpired in Cabinet.

This was inspired by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in the early years after he assumed office. It is meant for officers, particularly heads of department, to understand the policies that the Government has formulated. After the briefing, heads of department hold a discussion headed by the secretary-general.

Next, there is the weekly or bi-weekly staff meeting held by the secretary-general with the heads of department under his jurisdiction. At these meetings problems encountered by the heads of department are raised and discussed.

At their own level, heads of department hold their own meetings with their section and unit heads. Problems of overlap and duplication in functions are sorted out and bottlenecks are identified.

In complicated cases the matter goes up to the weekly or bi-weekly staff meeting and thence to higher levels.

All these may be described as the vertical line of command and control, all of which fall within the structure of a ministerial organisation.

But there can be, and often are, issues and problems that cut across barriers and involve other ministries and departments which require inter-ministerial or inter-departmental involvement.

This may be described as the horizontal line of command and control. Recent complaints of fake identities and how they affect the electoral rolls, especially in Sabah, are a good example. The departments involved would have to interact with each other to resolve it. It is now a practice for most ministries to hold at least one seminar or conference a year, mostly away from the Ministry headquarters in some seaside hotel, resort or retreat at which a set of policy papers is presented and discussed.

It is not uncommon on such occasions for experts from agencies such as the PSD and the EPU to be invited to talk on basic issues to provide the foil, as it were, to the discussions that take place. Where relevant the private sector and the academic establishments are also invited to participate.

Even such an exalted body as the judiciary holds this kind of annual conference.

Despite these constant interactions, there are regular complaints in the

Press about inordinate delays in resolving problems on the ground. The judiciary is reported to have accumulated a number of cases involving delays in writing out the judgments of cases already heard.

Land offices in many parts of the country are alleged to have piles of land title cases waiting to be processed. Despite billions spent on road construction and road works, traffic congestion and jams are a daily occurrence and often reach nightmarish proportions after a heavy downpour.

Rubbish collection is so shoddy that mountains of rubbish can be seen piled up in many parts of the cities and towns. The intricate network of drains in many cities and towns continue to remain clogged causing extensive areas to be flooded during heavy downpours.

Roads become raging torrents, resulting in massive traffic jams. The list is almost endless and, what is worse, most of the problems are not new. Many of these are old problems, and due to years of apathy and neglect, have become exacerbated.

In his first Press conference after assuming office as Chief Secretary, Tan Sri Samsudin Osman emphasised that action should be taken to improve counter services throughout the country.

He considered this to be of vital importance since in his view it is at the counter that there was the closest interaction between people and the Government. Any delay or display of rudeness damaged the image of the Government and undeniably that of the public service.

According to the latest Press reports Samsudin would be visiting departments. He would obviously want to check and find out on the spot that ails the department concerned.

He would certainly have his experts, especially from Malaysian Administrative Modernisation and Management Planning Unit (Mampu) and the Public Complaints Bureau with him. The PSD being an integral part of the Prime Minister's Department would also be directly involved. This is a bold new approach and would help to resolve problems, certainly at the macro level.

But most of the problems are of micro origin, and judging from the complaints voiced by individuals and concerned groups in the Press, they are persistent in nature. New problems too continue to emerge at this level following the implementation of new policies.

It is obvious that at the micro level the delivery system is in disarray. It has to be restructured to perform efficiently.

An equally important requirement is to train the personnel to operate the system. There should be supervisors trained to monitor the system and to achieve the best results.

The Government has ample resources to undertake the studies and to devise the systems required.

Since its inception many years ago Mampu has built up a great deal of expertise in this area and is the ideal government organ to undertake projects of this kind.

As for training the personnel to run the systems National Institute of Public Administration (Intan) and Mampu can jointly work out and execute the training programmes or modules as the case may be. The systems should then be constantly monitored to ensure maximum efficiency, retuned and changed to adapt to changing circumstances.

A good example of what can be achieved in this direction can be seen in the system adopted by the Pensions Division of the Public Services Department (PSD) which prior to its transfer to Putra Jaya was on Jalan Tun Dr. Ismail, Kuala Lumpur.

Computerised some years ago the Pensions Division developed a counter service which was a model to be emulated. The last Saturday of every month was observed as Pensioners' Day and extra counters were set up, manned by

senior officers. Special arrangements were made for pensioners or their relatives even to park their cars within the massive complex of the PSD.

If the delivery systems at the micro level can be restructured, retuned and refired the nation's bureaucracy would most certainly have entered a new era of press-button management with a sharp cutting edge ready to face the challenges and dangers of the Asean Free Trade Area and globalisation.