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Someone, somewhere in the bureaucracy threw a spanner

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BOB and Abu are two friends and business partners competing in today's highly competitive business environment. They believe they have a good product and service to sell, having been doing their business for many, many years already.

But today they're scared. They're so scared that they're not even willing to let me use their real names in this article. Asked why, they said they can't afford to challenge or be seen to be criticising certain ministries, top down.

They find it increasingly hard to hold on to some Government declarations like Malaysia Inc and policies aimed at sharing the economic pie with as many people as possible.

While they are quick to defend the Prime Minister's Vision 2020 objectives and the manner in which Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has been pushing a pro-business national agenda - this will generate employment and consolidate the nation's wealth and resilience - they fear that an unfocused leadership at some level might derail these objectives.

They are puzzled. They had submitted a bid for a government job. It was accepted and endorsed. But while waiting for the paper work, they were told that the earlier written approval was no longer valid. Someone, somewhere in the bureaucracy had had a change of mind.

Bob, a young Bumiputera brimming with ideas and confidence, has a proven track record in his industry - having done his fair share of national service. He has helped many a government initiative and won praise all round.

When Bob and his company were riding high, he was everyone's favourite friend - generous, helpful and ever willing to rally behind a cause. But his fortunes have changed and he is now into his last few ringgit.

But Bob isn't one to rave and rant, much less abuse and run down the government agency concerned. In today's business environment, many businessmen will tell you that it doesn't pay to bad mouth such agencies. You can be easily blacklisted not because your project is not viable, but because you have a different view of things.

Bob's training as a sportsman is such that he's not giving up until the final whistle. He's trying to make things happen and believes that his product and services will be good for the nation.

It was good and desirable before, so the same agency said. Why not today? And why reverse a decision after the green light was given?

I can understand his frustration. He is almost at his wits' end. Many of his associates are still with him and are eager to see him back on his feet. To keep himself occupied, he self-taught himself to swim and to learn the finer points of reading the Quran.

There could be many more Bobs and Abus out there, running their little businesses and hoping to strike it big. I asked Bob and Abu whether they intend to seek legal recourse. They said no, not at the moment. Deep down in their heart of hearts, they still believe that the government authority concerned will revert to its earlier decision and endorse their bid - once again.

They don't believe in washing dirty linen in public, but I can't imagine how much longer they can stand the strain before something bursts. They have sold some of their assets to survive but they still maintain a quiet dignity, though I can feel the anger and deep frustration as they talk.

