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Integration needs to be more meaningful

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SO the nation's chief public prosecutor, deputy chief law enforcer and the top civil servant in the Medical and Health Services Department hail from Sabah and Sarawak, as the Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad recently noted.

Considering that the first position is traditionally a political appointment and the holder of the second retires in the not too distant future, it remains far-fetched to claim that a year shy of 40 after Malaysia, Malaysians from Sabah and Sarawak have fully integrated into the mainstream of national life.

It bewilders me that for States representing easily a fifth of the nation's population, I can only name one current career diplomat from Sarawak of ambassadorial rank, our man in Venezuela.

I know of no military general, current or retired, hailing from either Sabah or Sarawak.

I have met and known countless personalities in illustrious public positions hailing from Kelantan and not a few from tiny Perlis.

Why the apparent dearth of ranking public officials from our two eastern States?

If exemplary role models at the top echelons of our national Government are important to instil that sense of true belonging, obviously we need to do a lot better in producing such role models from Sabah and Sarawak.

This is no small matter of seeking to encourage parochial pride. Our long-term national cohesion ultimately may depend on it.

People from Sabah and Sarawak fairly frequently bemoan the fact that policies and development plans hatched in Putrajaya sometimes lack particular sensitivity to the peculiarities in the two States, especially the physical fact of sparse populations scattered over an area representing some two-thirds of the entire nation's total land mass.

This must tell of some lack in inputs from officers with experience of conditions in Sabah and Sarawak.

The first instinct when confronted with such a situation is for us to complain and then to dig for conspiracies which can then be dramatically held up as proof that people from Sabah and Sarawak have been discriminated against in terms of opportunities and promotions in the public service.

The truth may actually be a lot more mundane and far less dramatic.

It may all well be a rather extreme case of benign neglect running in both directions which lands us in such a strange and bewildering state of affairs.

The two States, after nearly 40 years, still guard perhaps slightly too zealously for their own good what can only be somewhat generally described as "State rights", which can only be to the detriment of overall national integration.

This is perhaps best exemplified by the still politically touchy subject of State control over immigration matters.

In an increasingly globalised "borderless" world, such a "fixation" with State control over the free flow of even other Malaysians into the two States - held even by educated and thinking Sabahans and Sarawakians - can only be seen as somewhat arcane.

It certainly flies in the face of all sense of rationality, considering that larger population concentrations will be precisely the economic

fillip the two States badly need.

One upshot of such myopia is that the two States' best and brightest are either consciously or subconsciously drawn into State rather than national service.

A rather pervasive sense of contentment means that even Sabah and Sarawak officers in Federal departments in the two States would want to move away from their home States only very reluctantly, with the prospect of career advancement from moving often not entirely persuasive nor decisive.

Alas, the sea that divides the two parts of the country remains a rather forbidding physical stumbling bloc and although I have access to no documentary evidence to back me up, anecdotal ones suggest this to be a rather serious problem.

You see it so very often in the relieved and smiling faces of Sabah or Sarawak officers finally "returning" after tours of duty in the Federal Capital or other States.

What then can the Government do to arrest such an unhealthy state of affairs? For starters, there has to be recognition that there will be no quick fixes. But incremental steps need to be consciously taken.

The power of political persuasion in all this must also not be discounted.

Sabah and Sarawak are strongly represented in some key ministries at both ministerial and deputy ministerial levels - Energy, Communications and Multimedia, Science, Technology and Environment, Agriculture, Land and Co-operative Development, the Prime Minister's Department, Foreign Affairs, Defence, Local Government and Housing and National Unity and Social Development.

If the top political leadership in these ministries is proactive in pushing for meaningful representation from Sabah and Sarawak among the ranks of their permanent officials and makes sure it becomes a priority agenda within Cabinet itself, a very vital step would have already been set in motion.

It must be accepted that a politically desirable outcome requires political initiative and leadership to nudge it along.

It is of course a long haul to undo psychologically what we cannot undo physically. It is also important to realise any meaningful solution is a two-way street and each and everyone of us who calls Malaysia home has his or her role to play to overcome this challenge.