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Keep Minister of Education post an apolitical appointment

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IN 1999, when then Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad handpicked a professional to be the Minister of Education, the news was welcomed by many, especially academia, although it came as a shock to many an aspiring politician.

After all, the Ministry of Education has always been regarded as a powerful ministry - too powerful to be given to a non-politician. Perhaps.

The bold step clearly demonstrates that education is a serious business that must remain apolitical at all cost, since the future of any nation depends on it.

Thus, the rationale that a professional should run it, free from political polemics, makes a lot of sense.

Moreover, the person named for the portfolio has very impressive credentials. Being one of the longest serving vice-chancellors of the second oldest university in the country, there was little doubt that the candidate was more than capable of handling the portfolio.

However, education being what it is, not everyone can refrain from turning it into a political circus. Ideas as benign as the Vision School are being politicised, sometimes putting the minister on the spot.

Many times, however, the issues were successfully de-politicised, and some were even rendered non-issues. This is perhaps one obvious merit of a professional being made to lead and manage a high-profile ministry.

Recently, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi took the same tack. He brought in another professional into yet another powerful ministry - the Ministry of Finance.

In similar vein, the candidate also has impeccable qualifications and the experience to be the Second Minister of Finance. Some eyebrows were raised among the politicians, but the decision was an all-round popular one.

To his credit, the Prime Minister took an even bolder step when he announced that the appointment was not subject to the election process.

In other words, the Second Finance Minister, to all intents and purposes, will remain a professional so that he can devote himself to ensuring that Malaysia remains a highly respectable economic model.

In the words of the Prime Minister, he does not want the ministry to be politicised. Or more accurately, the minister will not be subjected to any form of political pressure when making his decisions.

This is a noble intention and the decision to make the position of the Second Minister apolitical gained immediate support.

This was reflected by the jump in the KLSE Composite Index, breaking through the 800 mark. Now analysts are predicting that in the next three months the index will hit the 900 mark. Some even point to the 1,000 mark (AWSJ, Jan 20).

In sum, one is very confident that the country's fiscal policy will not be subjected to any form of compromise, particularly the sort that feathers one's own nest.

We are assured that the investment in the country's future will be based on sound professional judgment.

In much the same way, education is also an investment in the country's future. In fact, more so.

Education is a life-long investment involving Malaysians of all walks of life, and on the outcome of which the country's collective survival hinges

on. This is why education is such a sensitive subject.

It, therefore, makes sense that the Minister of Education should be free of politics and remain a professional. Like the Second Finance Minister, he must not be subjected to the electoral process.

The urgency of the matter cannot be underestimated in view of the fast-changing world, which is making an impact on education.

Increasingly, people expect the education system to provide not only the necessary qualifications and skills, but also the psyche, values and behaviour traits that will help mould responsible citizens who will contribute to the social fabric of the country and not merely to economic productivity.

Indeed, it is increasingly clear that Malaysians and society at large are at the crossroads, judging from the many shocking media revelations lately.

In many ways, it could be a warning signal that new educational strategies need to be put in place. Perhaps this is what the Prime Minister meant when he called for an "education revolution".

For a revolution to be successful, it calls for more daring and imaginative experiments to be carried out. As an analogy, it could be as revolutionary as the steps that were taken to take Malaysia out of the economic crisis of 1997.

After all, the practice of teaching and the process of learning have not changed much from what most of us underwent as students.

We attended classes with a teacher at the front of the room, and instructions were followed by a lecture, demonstration, discussion or silent work at a desk. At the end of the class, assignments and homework were given.

Examination performances have improved, but this is only one measure. Education is not only about examinations. It is not just about getting straight As. And it is here that a rethink, let alone a revolution, is urgently required.

For this to happen, a professional with sound academic experience is imperative.

Professional considerations must outweigh political ones, so that sound educational principles are not compromised in deference to some political expediency.

In other words, making the post of Minister of Education a truly professional and an apolitical one is a step in the right direction. This cannot be so difficult to undertake as there is already a precedent.

Moreover, the Prime Minister, himself a former Minister of Education, would certainly appreciate the urgent need for this, prompting the necessary and appropriate action for the sake of the country's future.

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