

18/10/2003

Armed to perform

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IN my decade-long experience in conducting legal courses for the public, I rarely find in my audience officials from the local authorities. But there are exceptions, and on occasion, I've seen officers from one or two councils in the Klang Valley, such as Majlis Perbandaran Subang Jaya, in attendance.

They are but a few enlightened bodies that see the necessity to empower their senior staff with advanced legal training. As for the rest - what can I say?

I remember reading in a national daily what Abdul Rahim Mahad, president of the Amalgamated National Union of Local Authorities Employees (Anulae), and Aziz Muda, its secretary-general, once told the media.

When asked to comment on whether allegations of misconduct and corruption in Majlis Perbandaran Ampang Jaya reflected a similar situation in other local councils, these two gentlemen said it was unfair to make such an assumption - no two local authorities are the same. I have to agree.

Making a sweeping statement is not only unfair, it is also mischievous and can only do more harm than good.

The reason Anulae's remarks remain fertile in my memory is what Aziz then revealed: He said one of the major causes for the sorry state of affairs in many local councils is the lack of a long-term, well-conceived and consistent training programme for their officials.

Aziz went on to explain that in some places, the only training many received was the initial induction course when they first reported for duty, and nothing more. In other places, officers were given some form of basic legal training, but on an ad-hoc basis and not as part of a long-term training schedule.

Is it thus any wonder why many officers do not have the necessary legal skills to carry out their duties and are in no position to thoroughly comprehend the objectives of what they are doing?

It is a mystery why the situation is the way it is. Has Anulae itself submitted a proposal to the relevant authorities outlining the kind of skills training its members need in order to do a proper job? Did its suggestion fall on deaf ears, or was it met with the usual reply: "Sorry, no funds for such training courses?"

The answer appears to be a matter for conjecture, but what I do know is that to have someone carry out legal duties or enforce a law without the proper training is not only risky, it is a recipe for disaster.

Earlier this year, I came across a survey carried out by a local newspaper over the Internet. The question posed was, "How resident-friendly is your local authority?" Apparently, of the more than 18,000 respondents, only one per cent replied in the positive and another seven per cent said it was "Not too bad". A remaining 92 per cent, however, said it was "Definitely not friendly".

Of course, we can't place too much reliance on such a survey since the poll may not have been properly conducted to reflect the real position on the ground. But what it signifies is that the general perception of the public towards local authorities is more negative than positive. And if this is coupled with what Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his minister Datuk Seri Dr Rais Yatim said on previous occasions, you have to arrive at the conclusion that something has to be done to upgrade

the skills and change the mindset of many officers within our local authorities, which I am told now exceed 250 across the nation.

And that brings us to the latest "dispute" between a certain local council and a sports club which, for the last 46 years, had carried out an excellent job of taking care of a football field. But that is another story which you will have to ask the residents of Ulu Klang to relate.

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