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Bouquets to government servants who put national interests first

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BUREAUCRATS are once again in the limelight. In one case of misconduct, two top officials of the Ampang Jaya Municipal Council had to leave. One was sacked, the other moved.

In another allegation of misconduct, the Ministry of Defence has pledged to investigate irregularities in the awarding of several building contracts amounting to millions.

In short, civil servants are back in the firing line.

In addition, the Deputy Prime Minister has, in the past week, spoken out against corruption and the need to weed out the problem.

That effort, if his deeds are as good as his words, should gather pace when he takes over in October.

This would be a welcome move and, given his current portfolio, there is every reason to expect him to put the necessary measures in place now.

However, all this negative attention has created an atmosphere of mistrust among the public.

For example, when things go awry no matter what the official version is there will float on the rumour mill an alternative suggestion intended to question the veracity of the former.

There is always aspersions cast to give the impression that there is an official cover-up.

Yet, there are many public officials who do their jobs well, fulfilling their duties with their "t"s properly crossed and their "i"s immaculately dotted.

They are sadly overlooked despite being in the majority. The media has seldom taken the time to put forward the preferred face of the public servant.

After all, good news doesn't sell, or so it has been said.

There are though times appropriate to the positive image and this is one of them. The public sector needs a morale boost and Datuk Subhan Jasmon, one of the two deputy secretary-generals of the Ministry of Defence, should be able to perform this task.

To one such as I, privileged to have seen him in action, he is a man who inspires both confidence and deference, not fear.

Confidence because he appears to know what he is doing and what needs doing. He appears, too, to know what is needed for the good of the country.

This, his position in the ministry, affords him well, as demonstrated in his recent handling of the negotiations for the procurement of the Russian multi-role combat aircraft, the Sukhoi SU-30MKM.

Subhan has a flair that made possible the successful completion of very complex inter-governmental negotiations a year to the very day it started.

He rose to the occasion and constructed a time-line and framed objectives that put national interest before all else.

One of his greatest achievements is, according to talk in the right places, the reduction of the price of the aircraft. The Russians had to lower prices or go away empty handed!

Forceful and a no-nonsense man, he is a civil servant unafraid of hard work and long hours. A man of vision, Subhan is appreciative of new and innovative ideas, willing to first listen instead of falling victim to scepticism.

And having listened, he is willing to firstly understand the efficacy of

the idea and work to improve it to meet the needs of the ministry and, therefore, the country.

Always a man of his word, which to the first-timer can be a grating experience although that dissipates quickly enough as he proves his mettle, Subhan is not a man who cannot meet the demands of his hyperbole.

Here is a high-ranking public officer who will stake his reputation on meeting self-imposed deadlines that do not just depend on his ability alone.

He is a team leader who is adroit at getting members of his team to work for and with him with minimum fuss.

In fact, his facility seems to be the ability to commandeer every resource to hand: internal to the ministry and the public sector; those of the involved private sector; and, that of his would-be foreign partner.

In the face of such an experience, one wonders why there have not been more said of a bureaucracy that has been able live up to the Prime Minister's expectations.

While it may be accurate to assume that Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has the intellectual wherewithal to visualise the unusual, he would not have been able to put his ideas to work without the support and dedication of the huge body of civil servants tasked to implement public policies.

The public has a short memory. It conveniently forgets that 45 years is but a short history, which to the average Malaysian is a mere half a lifetime. Most live it in drudgery with little to show for except maybe a couple of brilliant children scoring straight As.

Malaysia, though, has transformed the thinking of many Third World leaders who are now willing to entertain the notion of high-speed development.

The country's development model is fast becoming mainstream as more and more governments emulate the fast-track policies that are now Malaysia's trademark.

Why then are many of us intent on cutting our nose to spite our face?

Yes, transgressing civil servants must be punished. Yes, those proven corrupt deserve to be humiliated and have their photographs plastered all over the front pages of newspapers and television screens.

Yes, there must be avenues for public complaints. All these are necessary to ensure strict abidance to the rules.

But, let us not fall into the trap set by the international media. Once upon a time there existed an element of journalism, which recognised the peculiar needs of development.

Constructive criticism sat comfortably alongside feel-good stories of achievements large and small. Oxymorons such as "guided democracy" were entertained as possibly legitimate.

There was always the benefit of doubt and little of the arrogance of knowing all.