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Civil service needs an overhaul

HISTORIANS since Herodotus have always documented the deeds of the great and the powerful, rarely that of the common people. Not so, Prof Emeritus Khoo Kay Kim, who believes in a more "micro" approach to history, which has led to him becoming a veritable treasure trove of knowledge on Malaysia and its people.

When met at his spacious home, Putera Pusaka, in a quiet corner of Petaling Jaya, Khoo says one area that needs to change probably more than most others is the civil service.

Indeed, nothing short of an overhaul is required, he believes, putting his finger on the rise of favouritism as the primary cause of the slide in efficiency.

"I know of junior officers who have been given excellent reports, even though they have done nothing."

Some services, such as the issuing of identity cards may have improved over the years, but overall productivity and morale in many departments have been hurt by the widespread practice of favouritism, Khoo says.

Promotions and payrise depend on how close you are to the boss, not how hard you work.

"From the top to the bottom, if your superior officers like you, you can do no wrong, but if they don't, you can do no right."

Khoo believes it has a lot to do with the Asian culture, which places emphasis on loyalty and obedience, instead of merit and impartiality.

"It is very much an Asian problem, Westerners are less prone to it."

And the public has limited recourse in dealing with inefficient civil servants.

"It's hard to argue with people who wields the power. They can use the law against you, but when you want to use the law against them, it takes a long time."

And it doesn't help that given the runaround by a government department is a fact of life which most Malaysians have come to accept.

"You come today and the officer and the counter will tell you something. Come back the next day, there will be someone else at the counter and he will have his own version on how things must be done."

One way out is for the education system to stress discipline and greater sense of responsibility. Wrongdoers must also be punished instead of being sheltered, Khoo says.

Of late, even private corporations are showing similar traits.

"Many commercial organisations like banks, when you make payments, they don't give you receipts. When they do give you receipts, years later when you have problems, they don't have records and you are obliged to prove your case."

As for replying letters, with many government departments, in an age of e-mails and faxes having replaced the snail mail, "it's not only that you get a late reply, sometimes you never get one at all."

On the change in the country's leadership, Khoo feels that it is still too early to tell how Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi will perform at the helm.

"Not until he completely takes over the reins from Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad."

Having said that, he does not subscribe to the view that Pak Lah would find it hard to fill Dr Mahathir's shoes.

"Every Prime Minister has his own style."

No doubt, measuring up to his predecessor would be a big challenge for the Deputy Prime Minister, but remember Pak Lah is an experienced leader, and a well loved one too.

"He was a civil servant as well, and I believe he has said something about wanting to improve the civil service and make it more efficient."

Turning to something close to his heart, and which has seen tremendous change - sports - Khoo notes that in the old days, especially before Independence, employers were always keen to recruit people with sporting talents. Cricketers and footballers, especially, were valued.

With the water gently lapping the feet of a golden cupid statue behind him, Khoo laments the fact that most historians are not interested in studying and documenting sporting activities of Malaysians in the early days.

As a result, he is doing just that, and is in the process of completing a book on the history of Malaysian sports.

"Sports is an important part of social history because sports is about human interaction," Khoo stresses.

In the past, the padang was the town's social centre in the evenings, filled with people cheering on their favourite teams in football matches.

Even small towns held league matches as each was able to field two or three different teams at a time, he says excitedly.

Leaning towards a Balinese Ganesha sculpture, one of many collected by his wife, Datin Rathi Khoo, during their travels, Khoo adds that in those days, the football pitch served as a common ground where different ethnic groups interacted freely.

Just then, the aroma of Rathi's cooking wafts in from the kitchen. "She is entertaining some guests tonight," Khoo says.

He recalls the days when whole football teams would travel from town to town on bicycles or buses for friendly matches and competitions.

Khoo knows this firsthand as he did a lot of travelling on the football ticket himself.

It was on just such a trip to Kuala Lumpur that he caught one of the acts of the legendary Rose Chan, the stripteaser who defined BB Park.

The good professor did not say how big a part that played in him subsequently deciding to settle in Kuala Lumpur.

A major part of town and village life back then revolved around football matches, according to Khoo, and of course the amusement parks with its cabaret shows, ronggeng dancers, Bangsawan and Chinese opera.

They offered respite during the turbulent Emergency years. The communist insurgency was at its height in the 1950s.

"Now all have gone dead," Khoo says, referring to the town padang and football matches.