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Reduce ceremony and extravagance

THERE is a penchant in Malaysia for elaborate ceremonies and functions especially when the occasions are graced by the presence of a minister or, more so, the Prime Minister and the Rulers. The grander the function, the better it is for the organisers. The number of invitees is also to be the maximum possible and the poshest of places booked. And there must be a lavish tea break. The invitees should also not go back empty-handed but must be given door gifts, with the most expensive, often unusable and irrelevant, reserved for the guest of honour.

Even government departments and agencies are not spared the phenomena. Government officers invited feel obliged to attend, including those who do not really need to. They will then be absent from their desks and if the function takes place in the morning, their whole morning is rendered as wasted.

If it is in the afternoon they knock off after the ceremony. It has come to a stage where the ceremonial aspect is given more attention than the actual event. In the case of seminars or conferences, the substantive deliberations take a back seat.

Thus, the timely reminder by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi to government departments and agencies not to be lavish when organising their events and functions, including the launching of projects, but to be modest and simple. There have been such reminders before, even by Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad. All came to naught. Pak Lah should scrupulously enforce this, so that it won't again succumb to the panas panas tahi ayam syndrome.

Dr Mahathir had lamented the tendency of too many officials, including senior government officers, to present themselves at airports to send him off or welcome him back on his visits overseas, or even outstation. One particular important out-of-town politician was always in attendance, as if he had nothing better to do. Abdullah himself has commented on the presence of over 40 vehicles following him on a visit to the flooded areas in Kedah recently. Some had no business to be there, but tagged along merely to show their faces. It would have been beneficial if they had at least rendered some help to the victims.

There was some compliance with Dr Mahathir's advice before, but only for a short while. Hopefully, this current directive will be adhered to and sustained. In the past few days, Abdullah has been setting the tone - to curb corruption, minimise bureaucracy and politicking and now to reduce extravagance.