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Of ministerial styles and stopping the buck

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ARETIRED senior civil servant wryly observed that a couple of ministers he had the misfortune of serving did not like to claim responsibility for their decisions.

Rather than facing the political bullets themselves, they put the blame on Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad. Their common refrain: "What to do? The PM wants it this way". Even some spineless corporate leaders write to the PM to justify their business manoeuvres and later triumphantly declare, "Dr M wants it this way; I have his blessings".

Where governance is concerned, such excuses leave the impression of senior ministers being relegated to the role of agents of the PM. They also lend credibility to the perception of a prime ministerial hegemony in the country. Unless one adopts flimsy criteria such as length of service and a strong personality, it is hard to argue for the entrenchment of such a hegemonic power.

Consider two other reasons. First, there has been essentially no acquisition of a new body of statutory prime ministerial powers. Second, the constitutional position of the Prime Minister's office in relation to other political actors such as the senior ministers in the Cabinet remains largely unchanged.

Like most prime ministers, Dr Mahathir operates within a particular policy space - high policy, which refers to the the country's economic well-being and security. In the mid-1997 financial crisis, Malaysia's financial affairs were deemed high policy, so Dr Mahathir played a leading role.

But even in areas of high policy, the PM's powers are not absolute. He has to co-operate with key ministers and make decisions in consultation with the other ministers. While the PM may extend his reach into other policy domains - and he possesses the intellectual rigour to be a policy polymath - he does not do so all the time.

Apart from the few who try to hide behind the PM's coat-tails, there are many other ministerial types in the Cabinet. Political scientists have identified five types. First, the commanders - ministers who pursue a policy agenda that derives from their own experience and ambitions rather than an overarching political creed. Second, there are the ideologues - ministers driven by clear, prescient and consistent political philosophy.

Third come the managers - ministers who are pragmatic in their approach. Fourth are the agents - those who ape what the Prime Minister does and act on his or her behalf. In the fifth and final category are the team-players - traditionalists who believe in collective deliberation and decision-making.

Most of our senior ministers display characteristics of many types. According to some retired civil servants, some ministers rely completely on departmental briefing or go along with the PM's views in Cabinet committees. This could be due to a couple of factors: they may have difficulty grasping the issues at hand or may be anxious to show a spirit that accepts the ultimate authority of the PM. A few keep an arm's length relationship with the civil service, believing this is the best way to autonomy in policy-making. Several discreetly scorn the parliamentarians, regarding them as essentially peripheral and subservient to the Government's actions.

The public may be forgiven for thinking there's a dearth of ideologues.

But to her credit, Minister of International Trade and Industry Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz has proven to be a baron in her policy territory. She does not fear to assert her ministerial authority and powers to make decisions, and the civil servants under her respect and implement her decisions.

But, commented one retiree, several ministers tend to take a response-mode or an event-led leadership style while others are overwhelmingly concerned with the political underpinnings of their portfolio. They are not agenda innovators, but stale agenda conservators. Like senior editors, ministers, by virtue of their powers, are gatekeepers who either bring things onto or keep them off the Government's agenda.

The different ministerial styles aside, the civil service needs ministers with ideas, to provide departments under their care with intellectual stimulus, and have the gumption to take unpopular decisions and fight the departmental battles.

For the public, however, a successful minister is one who achieves the desired policy goals and, instead of passing the buck to Dr Mahathir, honours the doctrine of ministerial responsibility.