

16/06/2003

Time to buck up

A Kadir Jasin

THE time for making threats against civil servants for not carrying out their duties with transparency and accountability has long gone. The complaints against civil servants have become a rule rather than an exception. The credibility of the Government is at stake. These complaints are not confined to the staff of district offices and local governments. They are widespread.

With the Government regularly appointing politicians from its parties to sit as councilors in the local councils, the image of the Government is closely tied to their efficiency or the lack of it.

This has led to many people thinking that local governments should be turned into autonomous political and administrative units through the holding of local council elections.

In the meantime, if the Government is serious about taking the bull by its horns, it has to acknowledge that the dissatisfaction with the civil servants, in particular, and the bureaucracy, in general, is widespread.

We are talking about the dissatisfaction of the ordinary people - those who have to queue up at service counters, wait under the trees and go on a wild goose chase for missing files and shredded documents.

We certainly are not talking about the Datuks, Tan Sris, Tuns and retired senior civil servants. Most of all, we are not talking about the towkays and tycoons.

We are talking about the padi farmers in Pendang, Kedah, the rubber smallholders in Selama, Perak, the fishermen in Marang, Terengganu and the chicken rice sellers in Chow Kit, Kuala Lumpur - the people, for whom corruption, whether it is under or above the counter, can mean only one thing: a threat to their livelihoods.

Thus, when Deputy Housing and Local Government Minister Datuk M Kayveas alleged that there is widespread corruption in the enforcement branch of the Ampang Jaya Municipal Council (MPAJ), he not only grabbed public attention but also gained considerable support.

People are fed up with officials promising to investigate or asking complainants to produce proof each time an allegation is made against a civil servant or a Government department. They want action.

So, whether it was his intention to take on the MPAJ or whether he was drawn into the controversy by his lack of experience in dealing with the monster we all know as the perkhidmatan awam (the civil service), Kayveas has done what very few politicians have dared to do - confront the civil service, something that the ordinary people have been hoping for.

Granted that the civil service has improved over the years - with better premises and equipment, client charters and the anugerah perkhidmatan cemerlang (excellence service awards) - the quality of service to the public remains patchy.

This is a fact acknowledged by the Government in its latest economic stimulus package announced by Prime Minister and Finance Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad on May 21, when it stressed repeatedly the need to improve the delivery system.

This was followed on June 4 when the Cabinet, in its weekly meeting (chaired by Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi), issued a warning to all local governments to ensure that laws are effectively enforced so that they are not exploited by unscrupulous elements.

Aptly, the decision was made known to the public by the Minister in the Prime Minister's Department responsible for law Datuk Seri Dr Rais Yatim. Rais has been openly speaking out against excesses and inefficiency in the civil service, the judiciary and other branches of the Government.

In any case, not too many ministers, deputy ministers and parliamentary secretaries dare or care to confront the civil service. Many things can go wrong and have gone wrong when ministers, Menteri Besar and chief ministers intentionally or accidentally offended civil servants - files went missing, no official cars waited at the airport and juicy stories started circulating.

Rais, and now Kayveas, cannot expect to be very popular with civil servants at the rate things are going. My advice is to keep their rear guarded, and by that I mean literally. We don't know how deep this malaise is.

We must bear in mind that what is illegal or wrong in the eyes of the law - corruption is certainly one - is simply a good business arrangement among the corrupt and the unscrupulous.

Otherwise, how do we explain the prevalence of illegal gambling arcades and the pirated VCD trade? Or how do we explain poor landowners having to wait for years to have their applications for titles approved by the district land offices.

In the case of pirated CDs and VCDs, literally every other action taken by the authorities failed until desperate singers, composers, musicians and executives of recording companies met Dr Mahathir at Putrajaya in July last year to seek his help.

Now, some people have become so driven that they want the power to break into our homes to see if we are watching pirated VCDs and pornographic movies featuring some local models, starlets and air-hostesses.

There are many more things that they should do before they start barging into our homes. They should find out why so many CD and VCD copying machines are being imported into the country? Who imports them? Who buys them?

Surely, the authorities know the size of the CD and VCD market in the country. When more such machines are imported, we can fairly assume that they are either going to be under-utilised or used to make illegal copies of local and imported music and cinematic products.

It should not come as a surprise if there are more pornographic titles being sold in Malaysia than on the streets of New York. Just to recap, the pornographic trade in New York was largely wiped out when the last New York Mayor Rudolph (Rudy) Giuliani launched a war against smut.

We cannot stop people from wondering why the pirated CD and VCD trade continues to flourish in the cities and the pasar malam when not a day passes by without a minister or a senior civil servant vowing to smash it.

Now, we are going a step further by making the Inspector-General of Police Tan Sri Norian Mai himself responsible for the operations against the pirated and pornographic VCD trade.

Suddenly, pirated and pornographic VCDs are being confiscated by the hundreds of thousands. Funny that the Police and the Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs Ministry enforcement officers could not find them in such quantities before.

There appears to be a need to remind enforcement officers that uneven or unfair enforcement has the effect of criminalising society. It forces people to take the law into their own hands.

Consider the case of villagers and residents of housing estates burning parked buses and lorries or roughing up drivers of heavy vehicles. They are being forced to take such actions because nobody cares that the buses and trucks are parked illegally in housing estates and heavy vehicles are

allowed to use roads not intended for them.

Sooner or later, a more serious situation could arise where people will be willing to organise themselves into vigilantes or, worse still, revert to paying protection money to whoever that can provide them security. It has happened in the days of the triads and there is nothing to stop it from recurring, given the less than transparent law enforcement at many levels.