

Diplomatic disarray
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Mariam Mokhtar

Are Malaysian High Commissions (MHC) run like personal fiefdoms, with the Malaysian government using its political influence to bring pressure to bear on the diplomatic staff at these locations? Or are some diplomats inefficient and abusing their overseas postings and taxpayers' money?

When the parliamentary select committee (PSC) on electoral reform visited the United Kingdom last week, Malaysians were optimistic about the PSC's engagement with relevant UK bodies to improve Malaysia's electoral process.

Another story has emerged from the shadows of duplicity.

High-ranking sources in London allege that another MHC incident is being swept under the carpet. They say that the PSC did not keep an appointment with a British cabinet minister, the day after they arrived in London.

When the PSC turned up at the House of Commons (the parliament) in Westminster, for their 11am meeting on Feb 22, they were two hours late.

It is alleged that our MHC staff had bungled the arrangements. As a result, our MPs missed the opportunity to discuss matters with a British cabinet minister.

Is this debacle a reflection of the High Commissioner, Zakaria Sulong's weak leadership and lack of professionalism? Or did he inherit a bunch of uninspiring deadwood and demotivated staff?

A few weeks ago, Zakaria lacked sensitivity and diplomacy when equating the Penan community to animals and thus belittling the suffering of both. Neither Zakaria nor Wisma Putra has apologised for the contemptuous remarks.

Nevertheless, the missed appointment only erodes confidence in our diplomats and our diplomatic service. Will this incident be mentioned in the PSC report which is due next April or will it be hushed up?

PSC chairperson Dr Maximus Ongkili, who is also the Science, Technology, and Innovation Minister, led an 18-member delegation on a three-nation fact-finding mission.

"In London, the focus is to study the constituency delineation principle. That's why we decided to spend some time at the boundary commission," he said.

Can overseas voting be implemented in time?

At the press conference and dinner for the visiting PSC delegation hosted by Zakaria, Maximus doubted if issues like overseas voting would be implemented in time for GE13, despite measures introduced by the Election Commission (EC).

Maximus said, "It does depend on when the election is to be called but the EC says they will work within the next two months to come up with the requirements on overseas voting.

"As for Malaysian students and civil servants, if you are already on the voters list, you just have to apply for a postal vote and they will mail it to you. You can then cast your vote and post it back. But for ordinary Malaysians, we need more time.

"It is our job to find ways to make it as simple as possible for Malaysians to participate in the democratic

process of our country.”

Both the MHC and the PSC have failed overseas Malaysians.

Why did Maximus not arrange to meet overseas Malaysians and get their views? Many of them have complained that the advice dished out by diplomatic staff is inconsistent. In some cases, potential voters were given wrong information on postal ballots. Others fumed about being given the run-around.

Instead of a dinner attended by a select group of people, the MHC could have held a public forum to enable Malaysians working and studying overseas to meet the PSC.

When told that the PSC delegation would meet Malaysians in Denmark, one Malaysian professional based in London said, “Was there a Bersih rally in Copenhagen? In London, 600 Malaysians showed their support for free and fair elections at the Bersih rally. The MHC is not paying attention.”

Another wondered if the Malaysian government had colluded with the MHC to prevent engagement between the PSC and overseas Malaysians.

MyOverseasVote (MOV) UK has asked that a deadline be set for the proposal of a new overseas voting system and for defining the criterion for overseas voters. Other MOV concerns range from diplomatic staff telling potential voters they were “awaiting instruction from Wisma Putra, and/or the EC”, to vacuous answers such as “You should register in Malaysia”.

A set of questions for both Wisma Putra and the EC

Last year the MOV prepared a set of questions for both Wisma Putra and the EC. They (the MOV) did not receive any replies.

Undaunted, the MOV posed the same set of questions to the EC, this time via Ambassador Ho, at the Embassy in Geneva. She received a reply from the EC which she then forwarded to the MOV.

The EC ignores the overseas Malaysians, whilst Wisma Putra responded only because an ambassador was involved.

Why is Wisma Putra not offering sufficient support and leadership? Why does Wisma Putra function like a third-rate provincial civil service department?

Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak has spent millions on foreign public media consultants to boost the image of himself and the country.

Overseas Malaysians have no need for expensive make-overs. They are proud to carry the flag and are passionate about their country. They make perfect mini-ambassadors for Malaysia and they are no less patriotic than their fellow Malaysians at home.

These Malaysians have not abandoned the country of their birth, whereas Malaysia and its diplomatic missions have failed them by denying them their constitutional right to vote.

In an effort to improve his flagging image, Najib has vowed to carry out electoral reforms.

First. The London MHC failed to respond to the MOV's queries.

Second. Was the opportunity, missed by the PSC, to meet the British cabinet minister a result of genuine incompetence, or a subtle ploy to prevent engagement? Did party politics interfere in Malaysia's diplomatic missions?

So how sincere and serious is Najib in carrying out electoral reforms? Is the High Commission in London

serving Najib or the rakyat?

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