

Gov't pay rise debacle: More heads should roll
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The article titled 'Of accountability in the civil service and putting people first' ended with the lines "those in the public service can now look forward to a better and a more rewarding career as the country marches towards meeting the Vision 2020. We can now put the dark episode behind us".

But has the dark episode ended? Although one prominent head has rolled, more were implicated in the salary revision debacle and should have been lopped off. Even with the latest attempt at salary revision, the basic problems besetting the civil service remain unresolved and continue to be kept out of the arena of public discussion and discourse.

When the Skim Baru Perkhidmatan Awam (SBPA) for the public service was mooted, it was clear that the scheme had the top echelon of the civil service as its principal beneficiaries. To prevent public scrutiny of the scheme, few details were provided and there was a concerted attempt made to rush the implementation through.

None of the country's major stakeholders and key players emerged with any credit during the period when the SBPA was being pushed through with indecent haste.

Cuepacs, the main civil service union responsible for looking after the interests of lower-grade workers, only got to grips with some of the main flaws relating to the salary inequities very late in the game.

Why did the Cuepacs leadership flip-flop over SBPA and finally register their opposition so late in the day?

Were their arms twisted or were they possibly blinded by personal ambition and self-serving interests or by other factors?

Aspiring economists would do well to study the role of Cuepacs in this episode of labour negotiations to uncover the tangled web and often invisible dynamics of individual, group, organisational and political interests converging and diverging.

Politicians to gain from SBPA

The stand of the country's top leaders was negligent and irresponsible. Thrilled at the prospect of the civil service continuing to serve as the BN's fixed deposit, Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak, Deputy PM Muhyiddin Yassin and their entire cabinet failed to pay attention to the details of the proposed SBPA and were unconcerned with its shortcomings.

A cabinet paper on the proposed SBPA was tabled and therefore the cabinet cannot claim ignorance on the matter or shift responsibility away from itself.

Aside from the civil service being one of the game-deciding voter segments in the coming elections, national interest also appears to be furthest from the minds of our political elite.

Many would have benefitted personally if the SBPA had been successfully implemented because the practice in Malaysia is that the salaries and allowances of elected politicians are

pegged to those of the country's top administrators.

Thus it was not merely the nation's top 5,000 civil servants that would have benefitted from the 'durian runtuh' or windfall of the SBPA. Tens of thousands of our political elite would have benefitted similarly from the surreptitious attempt to benchmark the pay rise to the wages of top private sector professionals and managers.

Is this why the political parties and politicians were so quiet on the SBPA during the critical months when the Public Services Department (PSD) attempted to ram the scheme down the country's throat?

Another key force - the mass media - was also derelict in their responsibilities when the SBPA was being rolled out. Instead of critically analysing the new scheme and seeking feedback from the public, they dutifully reproduced the stream of official propaganda applauding the impact of the new scheme.

Not a single editorial appears to have been written in the mainstream media calling attention to the obvious defects of the scheme and subjecting it to judicious scrutiny.

Today, four months after the scheme was aborted, there are belated editorials about how bold and responsive the government is to the needs of the lower rank civil servants and how fortunate it is that the scheme did not "see the light of day".

Spinning and hypocrisy, it seems, reigns supreme amongst most of our top media practitioners when it comes to crucial matters of state that may have political consequences.

The only stake player that has emerged with any credit in this sorry and continuing saga of political opportunism taking advantage of a national issue is the Internet media. It was the Internet media that raised the alarm bells over the defects of the SBPA and smelled a rat in the way that the scheme was being railroaded through by the government and the PSD.

It was the Internet media that carried the comments of indignant readers calling for the scrapping of the scheme and decrying the attempts by government aimed at milking political mileage from it.

Salary inequality within civil service

Yet another special commission has now been set up. Headed by the former chief justice Zaki Azmi, the commission is to study the transformation of the civil service in a comprehensive and holistic manner. The commission does not have to look long or far and wide to identify the key problems of the civil service.

NGOs such as the Centre for Policy Initiatives have identified four key reforms needed for a revitalised civil service. They are:

1. Fighting corruption within the service
2. Depoliticising the service
3. Ensuring that the service is representative of our multiethnic population
4. Right sizing the service

To these should be added now another factor that requires scrutiny. How much did the Malaysian Salary Remuneration system (SSM) correct the salary inequality within the service or did it further reinforce the imbalance?

Under the BN government, the salary differential within the Malaysian civil service has developed to be amongst the more inequitable ones in the world. Has the yawning gap in civil service pay between the top earners and the rank-and-file become even worse with the SSA?

The new special commission, Cuepacs and others should have something to say on the salary inequality within the civil service even if the government would rather this issue be put into permanent cold storage.

In fact, all Malaysians should be very concerned with the civil service salary inequality and other issues affecting the well-being and productivity of the largest body of workers in the country.

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