

Civil Service As Umno's Fixed Deposit Or Game Buster
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The new civil service remuneration scheme recently announced by the government provides civil servants pay rises of between 7% and 13%. Coming just before the elections expected soon, it is clearly intended to influence the outcome of the elections. Umno leaders see members of the civil service not only as their 'fixed deposit' but also as the key game changer in the elections.

Will the generous pay rise make a difference in voting patterns of civil servants in the country? At first glance, it appears a politically astute move given the disproportionate weight of civil servants in the voting population and the high voting rate that has been associated with this segment of voters.

If we add up the 1.2 million civil servants and family members and assume that there is an average of 3-4 voters per civil servant household, this provides a total of between 4 to 5 million voters out of the 12 million registered voters. The fact that over 80% of civil servants are Malays means that whichever party can win over the Malay civil service vote will take over the reins of political power in the country.

Will this group of voters fall for what appears to be an extra large carrot being dangled in front of them?

Already the mainstream papers are carrying the mandatory follow up reports of how appreciative the teachers, police and other government staff are of this government recognizing their contribution to the country's development and progress through the new salary scheme.

This, together with the earlier sustained bashing of DAP parliamentarian Tony Pua's suggestion that the number of civil servants be reduced, appears to have given a decisive edge in the battle for civil service votes to Umno and the Barisan.

Will pay increase move backfire on Umno?

But is it a certainty that the civil service vote will continue to be in the pockets of the present government? Evidence is conflicting.

The present generation of civil servants both Malays and non-Malays is a great deal more discerning and demanding of their elected leaders and the policies needed. They, as with other voters in the country, are aware of how the government is courting their vote and will go to the voting booths fully concerned of the government's and opposition party's record on the issues that matter most to them – whether it is on ensuring a rise in their standard of living, or fighting corruption or abuse of power.

In fact, the timing of the salary increase – so close to the elections – could very well backfire on the government as it can be seen as a blatant attempt by Barisan Rakyat to bribe their way into

power, with civil servants as their tool.

What could also prove to be problematic for the government are the finer details of the new remuneration system and pay increase, and how it affects each voter who is in the civil service. Precise details of the pay increase and how it will apply to each grade are not available yet.

According to the Public Services Department director-general Abu Bakar Abdullah, the increases will be based on four principles: hierarchy; talent and experience; position and subject matter; and performance.

Likely outcome of pay increase

In the past it was the principle of hierarchy which appears to have been the most important criterion as pay increases benefitted the higher grades most with the lower grades receiving much less. In particular, the lowest-scale group received meagre increases in absolute terms, relegating many of these civil service households to the ranks of the relative and hardcore poor.

Not surprisingly under the BN government, with each successive civil service pay adjustment, the salary differential within the Malaysian civil service has developed to be amongst the more inequitable in the world compared with civil services in other countries when in fact it should be a great deal more equitable, given the paper commitment to the equity principles of the New Economic Policy.

The yawning inequality in civil service pay is likely to become even worse with this new pay revision. If that happens, it will further increase the income inequality in Malaysia, which is already among the worst in the Asian region, as well as internally amongst the Malays, which is the worst amongst the major ethnic communities.

The quantum of increase for the higher salaried groups needs to be stringently scrutinised on the basis of national affordability and socio-economic justice.

There is a considerable difference between a 10% increase in the RM1,000 salary of a lower grade civil servant and a similar percentage increase for a higher grade earning RM8,000. A progressive salary increase with the lower scales receiving higher percentages, and the higher scales – in particular superscales – receiving considerably less is necessary to ensure fairness and equity.

Members of the public may not be aware that the higher scale civil servants are also the recipients of substantial bonuses, allowances and numerous non-cash perks and lucrative privileges – all of which are not reflected in the monthly salary and accentuate the different treatment accorded to the different grades of the civil service work force.

Clearly it is a holistic review of the civil service, and not piecemeal pay increases that is urgently required. At the same time, Cuepacs and other stake holders should press for a comprehensive review of urgent reform issues that have been ignored by the government over the past several decades.

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