

Picking the right man for the job

The Commonwealth's top post is up for the taking. It's Asia's turn and Malaysia is looking for a willing and brilliant candidate.

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TUN Musa Hitam is busy packing his bags. He is travelling yet again, this time to the Maldives as he is the Government adviser for constitutional reforms. It is another Commonwealth job.

Musa regularly takes on such missions for the Commonwealth secretariat.

Yet, when the Malaysian Government asked if it could nominate him as the next secretary-general of the Commonwealth, Musa declined.

The present secretary-general, New Zealander Donald McKinnon, is retiring at the end of the year.

Musa, who turns 73 years old this month, said he rejected the offer because of work commitments.

"I am also too old for the job. I want to spend time with my family.

"Mind you, declining the offer does not mean I am not doing any job for the Commonwealth. Once I am given something I take it seriously, I don't just warm the seat," said Musa.

The former deputy prime minister has served in various capacities including the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association in the 70s, chairman of the Commonwealth Observer Group to the Malawi general election in 1994 and one of the members of the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group whose mandate is to look into violations of Commonwealth's fundamental principles such as respect for democracy and human rights.

Musa laughed when asked if his former boss, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, should be nominated.

"Dr Mahathir? He is too huge. He will scare the Commonwealth," quipped Musa.

The Commonwealth is a grouping of 53 nations in the Caribbean, Asia and Africa once under colonial British rule.

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TUN MUSA HITAM

The Commonwealth Secretariat, established in 1965, is the main inter-governmental agency of the Commonwealth, facilitating consultation and cooperation among member governments and countries. Critics see it as a Western-driven group and, unlike the United Nations, did not throw its weight internationally.

Musa would have been perfect for the job, said a diplomat, who added: "He has the experience and the networking."

McKinnon took office on April 1, 2000, succeeding Chief Emeka Anyaoku of Nigeria (1990-2000). The first Secretary-General was Arnold Smith of Canada (1965-75), followed by Sir Shridath Ramphal of Guyana (1975-90).

A secretary-general can serve for no more than two four-year terms.

Three serving Malaysian ministers, one personally approached by McKinnon, have said no.

Several criteria have been set by the Government in getting the right candidate, but first and foremost the candidate must be someone who is interested in the job and had at least held a ministerial post.

Musa said he had proposed several names including an ex-minister but unfortunately the names were rejected.

"They are not heavyweight names, at least in the international arena," said Musa.

Some officials argue that if a Malaysian was to take up the post, the person should be able to turn around the group to be more orient-

ed towards promoting the interest of members in other continents and not driven by Britain, Australia, Canada or New Zealand.

"The Commonwealth needs to go through a revitalisation and push for the majority interest of African countries or other developing countries. It is good for Malaysia to be in London. We are known for our diplomatic sophistication," said an observer.

Does the Malaysian public really care if a Malaysian holds the post?

According to diplomats, when Malaysia took over the Non-Aligned Movement chairmanship in 2003, NAM was not in their lexicon.

"Suddenly, when we took office, everybody starts talking about NAM," said a diplomat.

If Malaysia does not propose any names, Bangladesh and India are waiting in the wings to take up the post.

"In a situation like this, there are many brilliant candidates from other countries. Even if Malaysia decides to stand for the post, it can expect some kind of contest," said an official.

The next secretary-general will be elected at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Kampala, Uganda, in November.

Some critics say that the time is ripe for Malaysia to take a leading role in the Commonwealth. The quest is on, albeit on a slower mode, for the right and willing candidate.

However, the job vacancy notice should read: "Help wanted but only big shots need apply."

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Musa Hitam: Declined to take up the post of Commonwealth Secretary-General, saying he had other work commitments and he wanted to spend time with his family.