

THE GOOD, BAD AND UGLY SIDES OF CIVIL SERVANTS

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■ **By Farrah Naz Karim**
news@nst.com.my

PUTRAJAYA: Civil servants who break the rules or under-perform will get the boot.

Errant officials also risk a pay cut, being left stagnant in their position or demoted.

A no-nonsense Chief Secretary to the Government, Tan Sri Mohd Sidek Hassan, had this message for civil servants yesterday: Shape up or ship out.

He debunked the myth that civil servants could stay in service until retirement despite wrongdoings.

Sidek, putting an end to the practice of promotion based on seniority, said advancement in the civil service would only be based on performance.

Civil servants are used to the idea that seniority will take them places. This will no longer be the case.

"Unless they perform, they can expect to remain where they are for years to come, as promotions are not automatic or purely based on seniority.

"That would be too easy, and they would take things for granted and not bother to perform.

"If I do not enforce this, I am not doing justice to

the service," he told the *New Sunday Times*.

Sidek said hardworking civil servants will be rewarded with promotion over their seniors.

On meritocracy, he said it was in place but had not been strictly enforced.

Sidek said he would personally look at the track record of senior officers up for promotion.

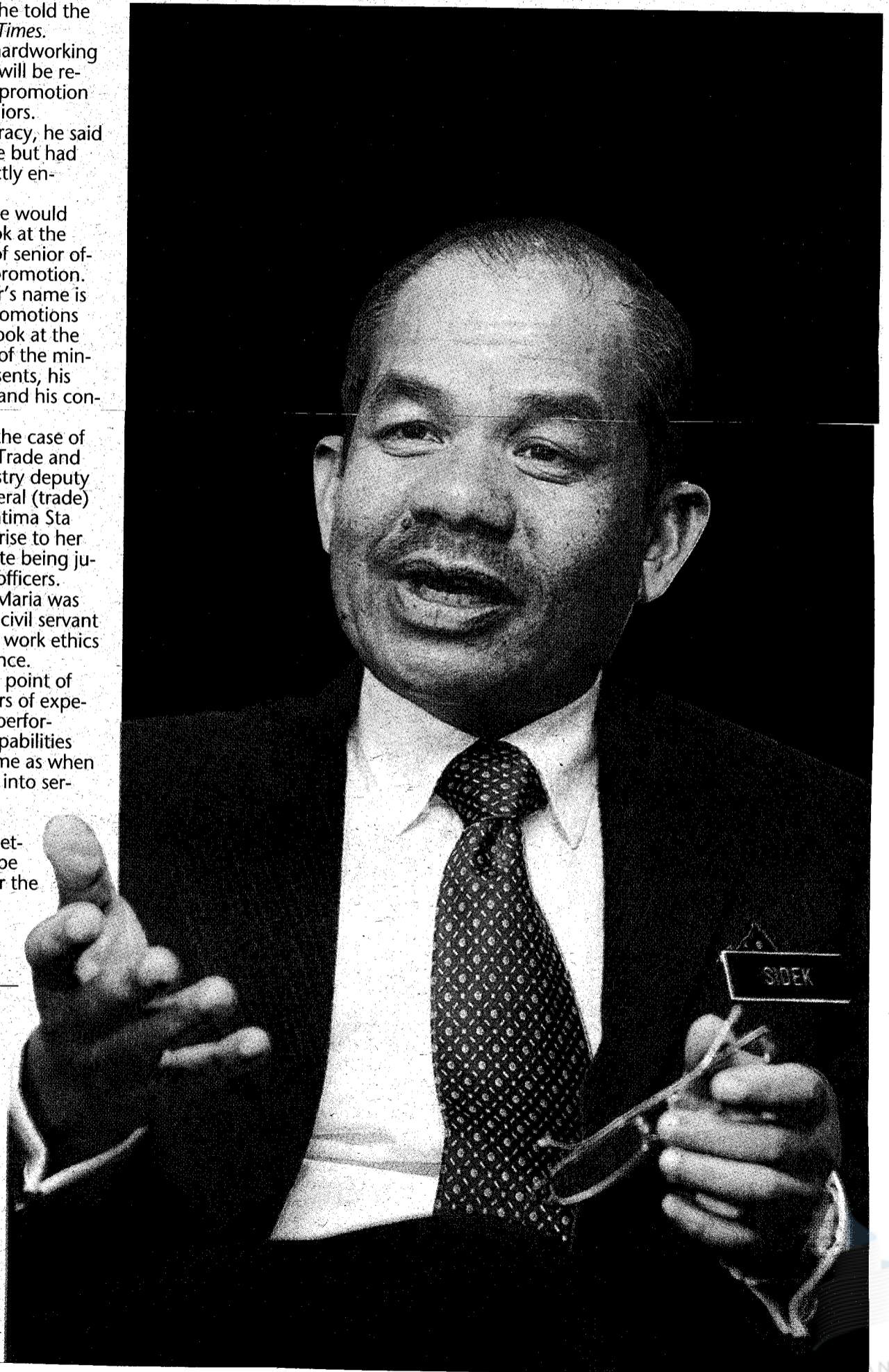
"If an officer's name is sent to the promotions board, I will look at the performance of the ministry he represents, his performance and his contributions."

Sidek cited the case of International Trade and Industry Ministry deputy secretary-general (trade) Dr Rebecca Fatima Sta Maria's quick rise to her position despite being junior to many officers.

He said Sta Maria was an exemplary civil servant with excellent work ethics and performance.

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Tan Sri Mohd Sidek Hassan
Chief Secretary to the Government

Q: The PM has long been stressing corruption eradication. What is your assessment of corruption within the civil service?

A: There is a lot of talk about corruption. That is good. It shows that people have recognised it as a problem and are not tolerating it.

The issue of corruption is always highlighted because we allow it. The whole idea of this public discourse is that people understand it and reject such practices.

I suppose with such strong focus and talk on the issue now, people take it that there has been an increase in graft.

But does it necessarily mean that? I don't think so.

Q: How would you best tackle graft within the civil service?

A: Prevention is better than cure. This goes for corruption eradication as well. This is where education, awareness campaigns, training and the media have a role.

The Integrity Institute of Malaysia also has modules, which include its role in preventing corruption among government servants up for promotion.

Q: What's the remedial process?

A: If you are a public servant, be prepared to face the Anti-Corruption Agency. The ACA has now been beefed up with another 300 officers.

However, before civil action is taken against officers suspected of committing graft, their cases must be strong enough to secure convictions.

There are instances where cases could not stand the scrutiny of the courts.

But if we know that something is not right, then administrative action will be taken and we will enforce departmental disciplinary action.

Q: Is this widely done?

A: This is done administratively, without publicity.

Q: Could some who are corrupt have escaped your eye?

A: The problem is that some bosses want to be the "good guys" focusing on rewarding, not punishing, those who deserve to be penalised.

The civil service now should look into the tougher part and mete out punishment accordingly.

Q: What are the types of departmental disciplinary action?

A: It could just be warning letters, but those issued these letters lose nothing. This is not on.

I would say, by all means, reward those deserving but also focus on the punishment aspect.

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"What is the point of having 10 years of experience if your performance and capabilities remain the same as when you first came into service? If a junior proves to be better, he would be promoted over the senior," he said.



Q: Clearly, warning alone is insufficient.

A: Administrative warning is not on. If a government servant commits a wrong or is corrupt and is liable for dismissal, then he must be dismissed.

If his case warrants a demotion or a pay cut, the punishment must be carried out according to administrative rules.

Q: There is this perception that some civil servants are complacent and corrupt because they feel that they could never be demoted or sacked from the service.

A: There are provisions for this kind of action. We have the General Orders, but they are not being strictly enforced.

Q: Why is this so?

A: This boils down to heads of department being too lenient. They think it is all right to let someone off scot-free because the person has a few years to go before retiring. This is not right.

Q: How are you planning to rectify this problem?

A: I have told them, I shall remind them again, and I shall monitor this. This must be critically addressed. We do not want the same person to be in a position where he is free to commit offences.

Failure to address the matter would also set a bad example to others. Their peers would note that no action was taken against the person — and take that as a sign that it is acceptable.

Q: As the top civil servant, do you accept the brickbats levelled against the public service?

A: The great majority of government servants are good. I challenge anyone who says otherwise. A few bad apples are tarnishing the reputation of the service. Why should we

allow these few to inflict so many problems on all of us?

Q: Shouldn't you have a Corruption Index for the civil service to allow you to assess the problem of graft?

A: The Integrity Institute of Malaysia is currently conducting a study with the Statistics Department on that. We want to make sure it is comprehensive. It will be ready sometime this year.

Q: Would you say there is a co-relation between the kind of salary civil servants get and corruption?

A: That is not necessarily true. You see, corruption is not the monopoly of public servants.

I know corruption also prevails in the private sector. These are not poor people. We are talking about people who earn millions a year.

So if you say that it is due to their low pay and they should be paid more, that will not guarantee a solution.

Q: ACA statistics show that the bulk of graft cases involve civil servants.

A: That is because the focus of anti-corruption is very much on the service. This reflects the seriousness of the government in tackling the problem in its own backyard.

They are supposed to be public servants and we cannot condone them being corrupt.

Q: Civil servants are responsible for the sound execution of projects under the Ninth Malaysia Plan. However, the feedback is that people appear not to be in the know of projects and their progress. Because of this, transparency is being questioned.

A: The government is at fault here. We are not good in selling ourselves. Our public relations are not as good as that of the private sector.

Certainly, there have been a lot of improvements. Not too long ago, just to queue to get a

number (at the Immigration office) would take a long time. Now passports can be obtained on the spot.

Government agencies which have overcome their shortcomings are being compared to (private sector) competitors.

Q: Shouldn't the government publicise the execution of projects more vigorously so that the public can monitor their progress?

A: Have you seen the improvements? Take the transport sector. The government is doing all it can to enhance the system.

These are among the projects that are undertaken to benefit the people. Of course, we see teething problems, but the situation is much better than before.

Q: Is the directive issued last year — for payments to suppliers and contractors to be issued within 14 days — closely followed?

A: Before, payments were made in 30 days and sometimes longer. In November, this was changed and a circular was issued that payments should be made in two weeks.

Now, in the Prime Minister's Department (where he is the controlling officer), over 90 per cent of payments are made within a week.

Q: If contractors or suppliers fail to get their payment within the stipulated time, can they come to your office to have their problems attended to personally?

A: I will certainly allow it. They have my word, provided the bills are complete and non-disputable.

It is also incumbent upon us that the payment is made for services that are properly rendered. Say a supplier fails to supply us with orders, then payments cannot be made.

The same goes for incomplete jobs. For services and orders that are properly fulfilled,

I can guarantee that payments will be issued in 14 days, or they can see me.

(Sidek showed records of the PM's Department's payment record for over 2,000 bills last year. Ninety-eight per cent were paid within 14 days. Of this, 90 per cent were paid in seven days.)

Q: What about the other ministries?

A: I have asked the secretaries-general to do the same. They have to monitor and ensure there are no hiccups, not only for payments, but in the progress of projects under the 9MP.

Q: You were appointed the chairman of a task force to speed up procedures which have given Malaysia a bad name among investors. What's first on the agenda?

A: We are an open economy and depend a lot on international trade and investments. We need to largely export as our market is small.

Hence, we must be efficient facilitators for investors, both foreign and local. The public and private sector must work well together. We must further improve our public delivery system for this.

Q: There are laws and regulations that impede the delivery system. What will be done about this?

A: Reviews must be made. We have made some changes, including the Strata Title Act 1985, but this must be ongoing.

The problem is that we have been so used to it, and we think it is the right way to do things.

We are examining the various laws to check if they are still relevant today. If they are not, why keep them when they serve as barriers to productivity?

Q: What happened to the

"paperless" ambition?

A: We will also address that in enhancing the service's efficiency.

For instance, if a certain process in the computer systems is not needed, it should be done away with.

Things will be much faster if you do not have to go through unnecessary steps.

The various departments know what these impeding steps are and must work to remove them.

Q: How does political interference affect the performance of the service?

A: If things are not right, it is incumbent upon us to set things straight. I would also advise my colleagues to listen to the constituents because you cannot plan and do things for the people from the ivory tower.

Just as they have to listen to the private sector, do the same when dealing with them.

The government must go beyond the interest of just one sector. At the same time, we also have to make them understand why we have to do certain things.

Q: What about civil servants in the enforcement sector who had been criticised for doing their job? For instance, Customs officers seizing illegal imported logs?

A: Illegal is illegal. They are doing their job by enforcing the law by the book. I have no hesitation in saying that what is wrong is wrong.

My advice to my officers has always been to stick to the rules. How else can you have good policies if you don't carry them out or enforce them?

Q: Many civil servants, especially front-liners who deal with clients, have problems with the English language. Don't you see this as a serious problem, especially when they deal with foreign investors?

A: We have to overcome this. Before, Malaysian officials were in the forefront as we could articulate points, and people listened to them.

We were even in the drafting committee at international conferences. Things have changed, though.

However, I suppose in the case of front-liners, they need not master the Queen's English.

So long as they have a certain level of understanding and ability to converse in English, that is fine.

However, they must compensate this shortcoming with friendliness, service with a smile and provide services as best as they can.

Of course, when dealing with foreign investors, the command of English is important.