

Servicing the foreign service

A MASSIVE recruitment exercise is going on in the Foreign Ministry. And the target, it seems, are the youngish, articulate professionals who can hold their own against the best diplomats from around the world.

This has a lot to do with the fast-changing landscape of world affairs and a little with the dying breed of astute and eloquent personalities Malaysia is left with in the foreign service.

A clear indication of this was provided by Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar when he told journalists at the end of a conference of the Malaysian Heads of Mission last Friday that Wisma Putra had been given the go-ahead to recruit officers direct and also to extend, if it deemed fit, the tenure of any high commissioner or ambassador after he or she had reached retirement age.

So critical is the situation that the ministry, it was reported, is allowed to fast-track its employee intake without having to go through the tangle of red tape that comes with the normal route via the Public Services Commission. This is unprecedented and clearly reflects the urgency of it all.

It seems there are about 300 vacancies, arising in part out of the ministry's expansion created from the repositioning of the foreign service to meet the increasing complexities of world affairs.

The rapid rise of China and India as well as the unrelenting tide of globalisation has, to a large extent, got the foreign service on the defensive on many fronts. Hence, the need for that special breed of smart, well-read people to do the job. Or at least to help out.

The hunt, it is understood, is not only for desk officers but especially those with the right personalities and mind to promote the country's interests in the diplomatic circles.

I see the importance of this which can never and should never be underestimated.

A diplomat, who is now retired, once lamented several years ago about the fact that Malaysia was facing a thinning breed of diplomats who could hold their own against their peers from other countries.

He said there were a few of the younger ones who lacked self-confidence to such a degree that they would stay away from parties and cocktail receptions that could have

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given them those precious opportunities at networking.

The excuse normally given in such cases, he added, was the serving of alcohol at such functions. “But it is just an excuse because everyone knows you don't have to drink if you don't want to. It is the establishing of contacts that is essential.”

I would like to believe that most diplomats are not like that. And that's what I have been told by some officers in Wisma Putra. But although cases like this is uncommon, even the very few ones tend to be discomfiting considering that these officers have the country's image at stake and could even be tasked with holding high-level diplomatic negotiations or drawing up treaties and diplomatic notes.

That, perhaps, was why Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak had to raise a timely reminder at last week's heads of mission conference.

He said the country needed diplomats who could develop excellent networking relationships so that national interests could be easily promoted. We need diplomats with the temperament and skills to achieve “insider status” within the most influential circles of the host countries, he said.

And this also explains Wisma Putra's big exercise to hire personalities with brains.

Fine. But the question is how much are they willing to pay?