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Author	Tan Sri Ramon Navaratnam, Chairman, ASLI Centre for Public Policy Studies (CPPS)

A first-rate meet-the-press session

COMMENT

by Ramon Navaratnam

THE Chief Secretary to the Government (KSN) Datuk Seri Dr Ismail Bakar's first meet-the-press session yesterday was excellent. It was highly relevant, pertinent and indeed timely and impactful.

We had not heard much about him or his views on how he would lead the 1.6 million civil servants whom we all help support through our taxes and our hopes, and prayers.

As the new KSN rightly pointed out in his interview, the huge civil service is the "backbone of the administration" and they need to make adjustments to serve the country, which is the government, the administration, and the people and society much better.

What are the priorities of the new KSN? He highlighted the high priorities that he would focus on in leading the civil service as follows:

► **Political neutrality** - the new KSN hit the right note in conducting the new civil service orchestra. Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad had expressed serious doubts, both publicly and even more candidly in private discussions, about the partisan feelings and performance of large sectors of the civil service.

After all, for 61 years the civil service had served only one government. They had thus developed strong partisan loyalties often based on personal and political lines towards political leaders of the same Barisan Nasional government. They knew of no other government at the federal level.

So, although wrong in principle, their loyalties became right and justified and internalised in practice.

Thus, understandably, to some extent, the civil service at most levels became subtly and sometimes even openly politicised from top to bottom.

I was one of the earliest civil servants for 30 years, from the early days of Merdeka, and definitely watched and regretted the changing times.

The politicisation of the civil service became worse as it became more monoracial and less multiracial, even in a multiracial and multi-religious country such as our beloved Malaysia. So what can we expect from the KSN?

Its just as well that the new Pakatan Harapan (PH) government has noticed the dramatic changes and negative transformation, as well as the consequent and relative decline in the standards and quality of the civil service, particularly in more recent times.

It is therefore a tribute to the new PH government to have recognised the rot that has set in and thus aims to rectify and improve the large civil service.

Therefore, the chief secretary has to cleanse the civil service of "politics and political interference" and make it a much more professional, efficient and intellectually honest government.

It is a huge challenge for the new chief secretary. But he can only succeed in overcoming these tremendous challenges if he gets the full backing from the prime minister, the Cabinet, the state governments and of course the secretary-generals and director-generals, who lead and give muscle to the backbone of the administration and government system.

► **Corruption in the civil service** is a dangerous scourge.

Corruption has and can continue to undermine and erode all the good socioeconomics and indeed all the positive and progressive government policies. The current strong commitment of the government to combat corruption at the highest levels of government is praiseworthy.

However, much more needs to be done at a faster pace to succeed.

This is partly because the civil servants are watching. We can go all out to catch corrupt civil servants. But if the civil servants think that some big sharks are still swimming freely and smoothly, they will sense injustice and become lukewarm in their cooperation and commitment to fight corruption. They will say: "If the big bosses can do it, why cant we follow suit?"

► **The chief secretary also stated that** "for a country to progress and determine its future path, she needs an effective and efficient, and well-oiled machinery and that is the civil service". It's certainly well said. That is an excellent aspiration, aim and ambition from the new KSN.

But he must quickly introduce a survey of the quality of the delivery system to find out how effective, efficient and well oiled the administrative system today really is.

How long does the public have to wait for follow-up action to rectify their many and varied complaints of poor services to the public?

Ombudsman please!

Very often the public don't get good and fast responses to their complaints or get replies after long delays. Thus, an ombudsman and his office must be opened, as a matter of priority.

From the outside, the perception is that it's very difficult to get early attention, within a reasonable time, to public concerns and complaints. Who do you contact and are the officers concerned contactable? Phones can ring and ring without being picked up and then you are put on hold and often passed from pillar to post, before you get some attention. After that you have to keep following up, as some officers are too slow in keeping their promises to serve the people efficiently. There is a lack of urgency in serving the public.

The new chief secretary could, therefore, institute a monitoring system, to check on the efficiency and effectiveness of his 1.6 million staff. He has to ensure that the administrative machinery is well oiled to deliver public services more smoothly and satisfactorily.

Conclusion

The new chief secretary gave a first rate meet-the-press session last week. I hope the new KSN, Dr Ismail Bakar, has similar, regular press sessions in future.

He can then review the progress made in achieving political neutrality, less corruption at all levels and definitely more efficiency and a better oiled administrative machinery to serve us all better.

The people, government and civil servants and retirees are waiting and watching for the supposedly new civil service in New Malaysia.

We will support the new chief secretary and even pray for his success. For if and when he succeeds and we hope he will, then the whole country will be grateful to him and rejoice with him in celebrating the good legacy that he will hopefully leave behind for a Better Malaysia!

Tan Sri Ramon Navaratnam is chairman of Asli's Centre for Public Policy Studies. Comments: letters@thesunday.com