

"Maintaining the Spirit of Unity and Harmony Will Always Be at the Civil Servant's Heart of Services

(RAKAN Sarawak's series of interviews with the
STATE SECRETARY on
DEFINING PUBLIC SERVICE DELIVERY)



RS RAKAN Sarawak : This year marks Malaysia's 50th year of independence, and the 44th year of the formation of the Malaysian Federation. How do you view freedom or independence and the role that the civil service plays in safeguarding our freedom?

YB DATUK AMAR WILSON BAYA DANDOT (STATE SECRETARY):

- I've always viewed freedom in two different but interrelated ways. One is the idea of "freedom from", and the other is the concept of "freedom to". The first idea refers to being free from anything that shackles or binds us, such as political oppression or domination. The second idea refers to being free to develop our potential, which is in effect, the fruits of having the first type of freedom, ie. freedom from oppression. People won't have any genuine freedom unless these two types of freedom exist.

The state or condition of a country's civil service is a clear indication of the kind of freedom that the citizens of that country enjoy. In a country without an effective, stable and competent civil service machinery, genuine democracy and governance is unattainable and

unsustainable.

It is the civil service machinery that is entrusted with the tasks of maintaining our safety, protecting our rights, providing the essential public services that we need.

All the things that we can enjoy in a free and progressive country will not be possible if we do not have a competent civil service. Moreover, the civil service plays an important role in overseeing the process of holding free and fair elections, which ensures our inalienable right to vote, a privilege that only citizens of a free country can have. The civil service is also entrusted with establishing, regulating and monitoring the systems and frameworks that allow for the efficient and effective economic processes to be carried out in the country. This, of course, ensures that the people can tap and enjoy the fruits of economic prosperity and socio-political progress in the country.

RS RAKAN Sarawak : In the history of the Sarawak civil service, can you mention some examples of when the Sarawak civil service played a significant role in protecting and safeguarding our freedom and the fruits thereof?

STATE SECRETARY : The function of providing for a strong military defense capacity is one clear example of

how the civil service, which includes the army, marine and police forces, safeguards our freedom. However, the civil service in Malaysia in general, and in Sarawak in particular, has played some fascinating roles at different times in the history of our country. And our civil service will continue to constantly adapt and reinvent itself in order to make sure that it remains relevant and effective as our country evolves, and our peoples' needs and aspirations change.

In the context of the Sarawak civil service, there were some unique ways that our civil servants were able to contribute in safeguarding and strengthening our country's independence.

For example, shortly after Sarawak joined the Malaysian Federation, we were faced with a period of instability from 1963 to 1965 when President Suharto of Indonesia, who was not happy with the formation of Malaysia, staged a campaign of "Konfrontasi" (Confrontation). We had to face terrorist activity in and around the Sarawak/Kalimantan border. Then, towards the end of 1965, we had to deal with another problem – the rise of insurgent communist activities. The "Konfrontasi" and the communist movement was eventually crushed, thanks in large part to the "quiet diplomacy and gentle persuasion" employed by then civil servants to win the peoples' cooperation to stamp out the insurgency. The civil servants during that time worked hard to win the peoples' heart by providing them with assistance such as rebuilding their longhouses, giving them free seeds for their crops and helping them till their lands by protecting them from possible attacks from the insurgents. In time, as the people saw the dedication and support of the civil servants, they realized that working with government authorities was a much better and peaceful option for them. And so, they actively supported the move to quell the insurgency by refusing to give in to the enemy's demands for food and shelter, and also reporting the enemy's presence, if they were detected in their areas.

RS RAKAN Sarawak : Now that the country has attained peace and harmony, in what ways do the civil service play a role in safeguarding our freedom?

STATE SECRETARY : As I said earlier, the civil service has to continuously adapt to the changing needs and aspirations of the people. As we enjoy peace and harmony, the peoples' needs has changed from securing and protecting their lives and property to that of improving their lives and making the most of the opportunities that they have in a free country. So, the civil service must move from merely maintaining the status quo (peace and order) towards development administration.

YAB Pehin Sri Taib Mahmud, our Chief Minister, expressed this succinctly when he defined development "as not exclusively a matter of money. It is a total effort involving money, efficiency of government and the absorptive capacity of the people. This requires that the administrative machinery should be able to play its role in a proper manner."

This then required our civil service to be competent enough to translate the aspirations of the people into administrative aims. At the same time, in order to move in tandem with our political leaders, we must expand our capacity to cope with policy changes.

Through the years, especially so when the Chief Minister pursued his "Politics of Development" philosophy, the Sarawak civil service has been going through tremendous changes in various areas.

Firstly, in order to cope with the increasing demands of developing the State, we needed to raise the quality of our manpower within the Sarawak civil service in terms of our academic qualifications and expertise as well as our work ethics.

Secondly, we needed to set up frameworks within the civil service organization to achieve greater integration and networking among our officers in the different agencies and departments, and in the different Divisions in the State. This is in keeping

with what YAB Pehin Sri called "smart partnerships work culture" in order to deliver results.

Thirdly, we had to improve corporate governance and transparency within the civil service, in order to enhance government accountability and prevent corruption. This was in keeping with the move to accept and tap the private sector's role as an engine of economic growth. We recognized that private investments through privatization, or joint investments in government-owned projects are needed as a driving force of our economy, particularly in areas that were previously untapped but promises huge potentials in terms of socio-economic benefits for the people.

Lastly, because we are part of Malaysia, we had to take into account the broader national goals set out by the Federal government, with Vision 2020 as our main challenge. This requires us to work in tandem with our counterparts in the other States within the Federation, in the spirit of federalism.

RS RAKAN Sarawak : What do you think is the one role that the civil service will continue to play and will remain constant, through all the changes that our country will undergo?

STATE SECRETARY : That would be our role in maintaining and sustaining the spirit of unity and harmony among our people. Personally, I find it gratifying when I am in the midst of a gathering of people of different races and ethnic origins, appreciating and enjoying each other's cultural heritage and traditions, and enjoying the spirit of unity and togetherness despite their differences.

Malaysia's uniqueness lies in the seamless blending, while still keeping the inherent distinction, of all the cultural traditions and heritage of our people. This is one treasure that we can all share and celebrate in our country.

I liken the civil service role to that of the main thread that runs through the multi-coloured and intricate patterns of the socio-cultural-economic milieu that

A conversation with SS

we have in Malaysia, in general and in Sarawak, in particular. If we pull that thread out, the patterns will unravel and the fabric will disintegrate.

Our civil service plays a crucial role in maintaining that spirit of unity and harmony among our people. I am genuinely proud of our civil servants, for example, who belong to a certain ethnic group and yet are able to speak the dialects of other ethnic groups because they have made it a priority to learn these dialects in order to understand and serve the people better. I know that there are many among our ranks in the Sarawak civil service who are able to do that.

I am also pleased when I see our civil servants going out of their way, and oftentimes exceeding my expectations, when they are involved in organizing major events in their areas, be it a historical commemoration or tourism or sports-related event, or a trade fair showcasing that area's products and services. When they get involved in managing these events, they do not get extra compensation and oftentimes, they will need to work longer hours in order to perform their regular duties while fulfilling the demands of these additional tasks.

I'd like to think that the reason they are able to do this willingly and ungrudgingly is because they experience the same sentiment that I have when I see the people mingling and having fun together and sharing that spirit of camaraderie and goodwill among each other. They know, as I do, that when we organize events such as these, it is not a waste of our time, money or efforts because the people come away from such gatherings with a deeper appreciation of each other and a stronger bond of unity and harmony among them.

Seeing our people uplifted, reinvigorated and with a renewed sense of pride and belonging to one nation, especially in a multi-racial country such as ours, is a priceless experience. It's something that no money can buy and that alone makes our role as a civil servant even more rewarding and meaningful.