

Getting non-Malays to join govt service

A more multicultural environment in government offices would attract more non-Malays to the civil service, writes CHOK SUAT LING

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HE is attached to a government hospital in the Klang Valley, but is bent on leaving as soon as he serves out his bond for post-graduate studies.

"I don't see much of a future for myself in government service. The work is tough, the promotion process protracted and returns meagre compared to the workload," Dr Dave Teh (not his real name) says.

Many of his non-Malay colleagues feel the same, he says. "There is a feeling that it takes longer for them to be promoted. They can't wait to go into private practice. Many leave as soon as they complete compulsory service, serve out their bond or finish their sub-specialty course."

Dr Teh's sentiment is one shared by many non-Malays. Low pay and lack of promotion opportunities have been cited over and over again as the factors behind the dearth of non-Malays in the public sector.

This perception, which has crept into the psyche of many non-Malays, has been palpably damaging. According to the Public Service Department's January-June statistics, Chinese made up 1.71 per cent of applicants and Indians 2.36 per cent compared with Malays at 84.62 per cent.

The low number of non-Malay applicants has raised concern and pledges from various parties to institute action.

MIC's Yayasan Strategik Sosial executive director Datuk Dr Denison Jayasooria says: "We cannot have a public sector represented largely by one community in a multiracial country like ours. If we walk into any government department, we would think Malaysia is made up of only one race."

He recalls a sizeable number of non-Malays working in the then Jabatan Telekom Malaysia, Jabatan Kerja Raya and other government departments in the early years following independence.

"There were even many in the teaching profession but there has been a tremendous decline over the years. The shift from 1957 to now has been drastic. Non-Malays no longer view public service as first choice because they have seen the difficulties faced by the one



Roadshows have been suggested to encourage more non-Malays to join the civil service.

or two generations before them."

According to Jayasooria, it is crucial for essential services related to welfare and security to have officers of all races as they are required to deal directly with the people. "For instance, in an area populated largely by Indians, it will make sense to have a welfare officer of the same race handle cases there."

A civil service comprising members of only one ethnic group will lead to inbreeding, he says. "A certain subculture will develop and this can reduce the service's competitive edge."

MCA, on its part, is embarking on a mammoth roadshow to encourage Chinese youth to join the civil service.

MCA central committee member Wong Nai Chee says that while certain measures such as awarding more government scholarships to non-Malay students have been introduced, more needs to be done.

"MCA is making concerted efforts in this regard. We will be

going round the country to disseminate information on job opportunities in the government service. We will visit new villages, schools and universities to create awareness," says the Kota Melaka member of parliament.

But considering how entrenched the problem is, it is argued that roadshows will barely scratch the surface of the problem.

Jayasooria says more effort should be made to ensure a multicultural environment in government offices. "The accusation is that non-Malays are not interested in joining public service but that is not true. It is just that they feel the dominant culture in government offices is not representative of theirs."

He gave an example. "I was abroad recently during Deepavali and visited the government-run Malaysian centre there. Nothing festive was put up. There was nothing to represent what would be taking place in Malaysia. It was culturally insensitive to Malaysian Indians studying there."

He says those who have tried

unsuccessfully to join the civil service should be told why their applications are rejected.

"This will erase suspicions and doubt. The interview panel must also be multi-racial."

He suggests the government conduct recruitment exercises targeting non-Malays. "For instance, if we are short of Chinese policemen, then there should be a campaign to recruit them. If we need 100, then recruit 100. I think we will be able to get the number required."

Jayasooria says that to be fair, the predominantly non-Malay worker composition of the private sector must also be addressed.

"We cannot address the public sector without also looking at the private sector. If the latter is predominantly Chinese, then Malays will look to the government and government-linked companies for jobs, and only consider the private sector last. This is also not healthy."

The Congress of Unions of Employees in the Public and Civil Service recommends

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Offer higher wages, incentives to attract all races

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higher wages to attract non-Malays.

Its president, Omar Osman, says that positions requiring special skills should be accorded more incentives and higher pay.

"The starting pay for a technician in government service is only about RM700, whereas his counterpart in the private sector can get more than RM2,000 a month, not including overtime. So we understand why many choose to work in the private sector."

It is difficult to get mechanics, car-

penters and maintenance engineers to serve in the public sector, so much so that foreigners have to be recruited, he says.

For chairman of the Asian Strategy and Leadership Institute Tan Sri Ramon V. Navaratnam, the civil service offers innumerable benefits.

Navaratnam, who is Transparency International Malaysia president, says there are provisions for medical, health and housing in public service.

"Senior civil servants get cars, drivers and travel first class. There are allowances for the purchase of black-tie suits.

"Your salary is assured and there is transparency as everyone knows what you earn. In the private sector, everything is confidential so it is easier to manipulate employees."

Navaratnam joined the civil service in 1959 and held several posts, including that of deputy secretary-general of the Treasury and Ministry of Transport secretary-general before retiring in 1989.

Going by the benefits, he finds it difficult to believe that non-Malays do not want to join public service.

"There are highly qualified non-Malays who have failed to gain ad-

mission into the administrative cadre of the service (Pegawai Tadbir dan Diplomatik). For those who do get in, promotion prospects are undermined by the majority who tend to look after their own interests."

He says it is important for every application to be recorded, filed and monitored.

"Every application must also be acknowledged. There is no proper record keeping."

On a hopeful note, there have been some positive changes. He says there have been several promotions involving non-Malays.

Among them are Prof Dr Khaw Lake Tee, who was appointed Universiti Malaya deputy vice-chancellor (Development); Prof Dr Tai Shzee Yew, who was appointed Universiti Putra Malaysia deputy vice-chancellor (industry network and community); and Federal Criminal Investigations Department chief Datuk Christopher Wan Soo Kee.

Jayasooria says: "But more needs to be done. We require policies that will ensure the inclusion of all races at all levels of public service."

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