

Civil servants must be apolitical

THE role of the civil service is to implement the policies of the government and live up to its election promises. Even so, government employees should ideally be politically impartial and work under the control of elected leaders – ministers, chief ministers or *mentris besar*.

The paradox of holding positions in the civil service, especially a senior role, not only gives officers a great deal of power but also puts them in a position of ultimately being accountable to politicians – local or higher up the ladder.

This undesirable circumstance is evident especially at the local level, be it district councils or municipalities.

Following the desires of political masters is one of the many dilemmas of civil servants today. Civil servants are supposed to work on the principle of neutral competence and provide services directly to the public. This means they should be apolitical when

implementing the policies of the government of the day, and their decisions made based on merit and technical criteria. But how independent are they in carrying out their tasks?

As seen through various reports in this newspaper on land grabs, the development of buffer zones and continuous operation of illegal outlets, be it gambling dens or funeral parlours, among others, many civil servants are at the behest of powerful politicians – or are themselves, Little Napoleons.

So much so that adhering to the principle of neutral competence and acting on technical criteria can sometimes be a challenge, more so at the local level.

Civil servants sometimes find themselves in situations of having to implement dubious and technically incorrect decisions due to instructions from “higher ups” – often translating to politicians.

It is a known fact that monthly Pemudah (Special

Task Force to Facilitate Business) deliberations often see members expressing concern on the rise of political power and the declining authority and influence of the civil service, especially at the district level.

Here you will find rising incidence of civil servants being made to carry out unofficial or undocumented instructions by politicians. It is indeed a worrying trend. Can civil servants ignore such instruction without jeopardising their careers?

Often ignoring the instructions would incur the wrath of the political master. But implementing “politically-instructed” decisions also make them open to accusations of acting without authority or committing fraud. It is not difficult to imagine such situations in decisions relating to the award of contracts at district levels with district-level politicians calling the shots.

Malaysians in general have reverence for people

in authority, especially politicians. And civil servants would be even less willing to speak up against politicians – who bring to mind Henry Kissinger’s thoughts on politicians: “Ninety per cent of politicians give the other 10% a bad reputation.” Perhaps there is some truth in this. Another American diplomat, Chester Bowles, who had been a close friend of India’s first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, made a point about political inference and the government machinery: “Government is too big and too important to be left to the politicians.”

In short, the government service is too important for

politicians to mess around with. With Pemudah, the buck stops here.

People with grievances on the service quality of the government should take them up with Pemudah or the Chief Secretary to the Government, Tan Sri Mohd Sidek Hassan himself. It is a gargantuan

task for him to ensure all policies and decisions are implemented, but he has proven to be a man of his word.

His “adoption” of the Ampang Jaya Municipal Council (MPAJ), regarded as among the worst municipalities in the country – due in no small part to excessive political interference – is a good example of Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi’s administration’s pledge to “walk the talk”.

But the *rakyat* must also be pro-active in providing feedback that will allow Mohd Sidek and his team to gauge the developments or wrongdoing and take action accordingly. Just describe your

problem and perhaps offer a solution. One can be assured that the problem will be attended to in a matter of days – even hours.

When a journalist once approached Mohd Sidek with a huge stack of papers and correspondence, he held up his hand, and pointing to his PDA (personal digital assistant), he said: “It’s not that I don’t want to attend to your problem. It’s better for me to know the problem when it is stored inside here and I take it wherever I go. Just e-mail me.”

That all important e-mail address is sidek@pmo.gov.my



Mohd Sidek (centre), who co-chairs Pemudah with Federation of Malaysian Manufacturers president Tan Sri Yong Poh Kon (right), at a meeting with Public Service director-general Tan Sri Ismail Adam at the MPAJ office recently.