



by Art Harun. *First published in [The Malaysian Insider](#)* Each day I continue to be confounded — and, not to mention, amused — by statements issued by people in the mass media. It has come to a stage where I am beginning to seriously doubt my mental well being.

Is it me who has become a cranky old man? Is there a conspiracy among men in black robe, yellow trousers and torn Pagoda singlet, whispering in the darkness of night while seated at a round table in a dungeon somewhere to confound me every morning? Or has our public forum been full of various innovative new concepts which challenge the old, established and soon-to-be outdated concepts as understood by oldies like me?

Consider the report in *The Star* yesterday titled "PAS is a desperate party, says Hisham". While the report made reference to Minister Hishammuddin questioning the act of quoting the Quran by a non-Muslim who "does not understand Islam", it also cited statements attributed to Tan Sri Isa Samad and Cuepacs chairman Omar Osman.

To Minister Hishammuddin, I only would like to say, with respect, that applying his reasoning, there are many Muslims who should be banned from citing Quranic verses too, particularly those who cite the Quran for their own political mileage. Added to that are those Muslims who only cite the Quran at a drop of the proverbial hat and when the situation demands that they do so while deep inside they care not whether what they are doing is in accordance with God's wishes or otherwise. These are the hypocrites!

Having said that, the following is what which has confounded me:

In Port Dickson, Barisan candidate Tan Sri Mohd Isa Samad said civil servants who denounced the coalition were condemning themselves.

He explained that politicians were democratically elected as their leaders, and thus civil servants would need to work as a team with the politicians to ensure that the national administration runs smoothly.

“You should know that you are part of the Government,” he said.

“You don’t condemn policies that you yourselves have helped implement. You are also the ones who reaped the benefits brought on by the Barisan leadership,” he said at a Hari Raya gathering organised by the Defence Ministry and armed forces civil service employee unions of Negri Sembilan.

Cuepacs chairman Omar Osman, who was present, called on civil servants to show their undivided loyalty to Barisan by voting for Isa.

"Continuity is important and being a former menteri besar who knows the civil servants here, Isa is the right candidate who knows the needs of the people in Bagan Pinang," Omar said."

It is getting a bit tiring for me to be moved to write about something as basic as "ABC" or in Arabic, "Alif, Ba, Ta". We have achieved independence from the evil colonialist for more than 52 years. We have submarines. We have a F1 team. We have scaled biotechnological advancements at such an alarming pace. We have sent our Angkasa 1 to do stupendous experiments with teh tarik, roti canai and giant tops in space. But back on earth, we do not even understand the basic concept of a democratic government and administration. Houston, we have a problem, quite obviously.

In our system of administration, the government, first and foremost, consists of the prime minister and his Cabinet. These positions are filled by politicians who are elected in a general election. There are many reasons why these politicians are elected.

The people may elect them because they are good looking. Or perhaps they are charming. Or because they speak well. Even because they pay the people to vote for them. And, of course, sometimes they are elected because the people genuinely believe that these politicians can actually work for the benefit of the nation. It goes without saying therefore that in actuality, the fact that the politicians are elected does not necessarily mean that they are the most qualified people to hold a political office.

The prime minister and his Cabinet govern the country. They make policies. They decide to implement the policies. They set the targets. They prepare and allocate the budget for every plan that they have. And the system requires and expects them to act in a fiduciary manner, namely, all their actions are done with the best interest of the nation in mind.

How do they implement all these plans? Who actually crystallises the plans into action? Here comes the civil service and the civil servants. They are the machinery of the government. They are the doers. Sometimes they provide inputs to the government in formulating policies. Some other time they suggest changes to the plans. But most of the time they implement what the government has, as a matter of policy, decided to do.

Herman Finer, the

political scientist, defines civil service as a "professional body of officials, paid and skilled." They constitute the permanent executive in a modern state. Finer classified the British civil service into three broad categories, namely,

administrative — those who help in policy formulation and execution.

technical — those who carry out technical and specialised works such as the doctors, lawyers, economists, scientists and engineers.

manipulative — those who just carry out orders given by officers in the above two categories.

(source: Public Administration: Concepts and Theories by Rumki Basu)

In contrast to the prime minister and his Cabinet, the civil service, being a "professional body of officials, paid and skilled" is a permanent body. It does not change every five years or so. Government may change, according to the will of the people expressed through a general election. But the civil service stays. All its officers stay. Their work continues regardless of whom or from which party the government of the day is.

As the civil service is supposed to be professional and skilled, it goes without saying that it must be filled by people who are qualified for the job. There is no election to fill in vacancies. Jobs are applied for. Candidates are interviewed. The civil servants are chosen from the candidates with the best qualification and, in some instances, experience which is required of the job. That is in theory. In practice, however, there may be instances of abuse where candidates of certain race, religion, creed or breed who got the job instead of the qualified ones. But I will leave that for another article.

So, the civil service is filled with qualified people. These people are paid by the government from the taxes collected from the people. The civil servants are therefore officers of the government who work for the government in implementing and executing the government's plans and policies. If they don't work they could be charged before a disciplinary committee and dismissed. If they misbehave, the same thing could be done.

In the current age, the public has high expectations of the civil service. If they fail or are perceived to fail, the public can complain. Law suits may be brought against them. The government itself may question them. The civil service is accountable for whatever they do. They do not exist in a vacuum or in their own impenetrable world.

That is essentially, what the civil service is all about.

Now. Must the civil service be obedient to the government of the day? Yes, they should.

Because the government is their master. And they are supposed to do whatever the government wants them to do in respect of the government's plans and policies. However, they must be obedient in so far as their work requires them to be so. If they are asked to do things which are improper or illegal, then they should not be obedient. They are subject to the law, just as the government is.

Must the civil service be loyal to the government? Well, yes and no. In fact this is not an easy question to answer.

Let me explain.

They should only be loyal and faithful to the government as far as their job requires them to be so. If a proper administrative direction is given by the government, they should loyally and faithfully execute that direction. They should not refuse just because they belong to an opposition party, for instance. They should not refuse to do the job because their personal faith is not agreeable with the job which they are asked to do. They also cannot refuse to do something just because they think that to do it would be repugnant to their moral standard.

For example, let's say Haji Mohd Adam, a pious man, is a licensing officer. He is in charge of issuing licences for business premises. Let's say the government approves the erection of a casino in his area. Haji Mohd Adam must issue the casino licence even though he believes gambling is haram because of his Islamic faith.

The civil service must be loyal and faithful to the government in that sense

But must they be ever loyal and faithful to the government of the day to the extent of subscribing to the political beliefs and ideologies of the government of the day to the exclusion of others? The answer is definitely in the negative.

The concept of continuity of the civil service does not mean the civil service and the civil servants must continuously support and vote for the ruling party in every general election. That is a mischievous statement to make. That is in fact a threat.

That concept simply means that the civil service must exist continually in order to carry out its function even though the government changes hand after a general election. It is like in Selangor, for example. After March 8 last year, the state civil service continues to exist. But of course, it now has a new master, i.e. the Pakatan Rakyat government instead of the old Barisan Nasional government.

There is no doubt that the civil service, to a certain extent, is political in nature. That is because the ministers from whom they take orders are politicians. Their policies may therefore be politically driven. The policies are debated politically in the Parliament. Even the civil servants themselves are sometimes politically inclined. That cannot be denied.

However, that should be the limit of politics in the civil service. The civil service and civil servants must remember that they do not serve any political party. They serve the government of the day. They are the instrument of the government, and not the ruling political party, to quote a paper by the British civil service commissioners.

The paper says:

"This is generally understood by Government and by the Opposition, who must also believe that the Civil Service will serve them, when elected. The maintenance of this trust places constraints on what civil servants may be asked to do by their current ministers. For example, presenting government policy in the best possible light while sticking to the facts. And it would be harder to maintain that trust if the Service engaged in writing material openly critical of the Opposition and their policies. It also places restrictions on the political activities in which civil servants may engage in their private life."

The civil service, despite all its close connection to politics and the government of the day, must therefore maintain its impartiality. Despite its required loyalty to the government, this impartiality

is required for a smooth transition in the event there is a change of government.

That is, in a nutshell, the correlation between the civil service — and civil servants — and politics.

It is therefore, with respect, not for Isa to implore and urge civil servants not to "condemn" government policies because they are part of it. And with respect too, it is wrong and highly undemocratic as well as unconstitutional for the Cuepacs chairman to ask civil servants "to show their undivided loyalty to Barisan by voting for Isa." That is just unacceptable in a democracy.

As for Isa's statement that civil servants have reaped the benefits brought by the Barisan leadership, I wonder what benefits the good Tan Sri was referring to. Does it mean all their salaries? Or the good life which the government has provided? Well, if it was the former, that is the civil servants' right, not benefit. If it was the latter, why must they be thankful? It is the duty of any government to provide a good life to all the people.

I find all these you-should-be-thankful stuff repulsive. That is because, really, we should not be thankful. We should ask for more. We are the consumers. Should we be thankful to Astro or Maxis or whatever? We should shout and scream for a better service all the time.

It is similar with the government.