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Breaking the communications boundaries — the Gobind way

The minister has mooted for Internet access to be recognised as a human right in the country

by P PREM KUMAR & ALIFAH ZAINUDDIN

CHANGE does not come easy, and often, it takes time. The US elected Barack Obama as its first African American chief executive in 2008, two centuries after its first ever president took office.

And while Canada has long pride itself as a champion of diversity, it wasn't until Pierre Trudeau — the father of current Prime Minister (PM) Justin Trudeau — appointed Pierre De Bane, an Arab Canadian, to the Cabinet in 1978 that the country had a "visible minority" as a federal minister.

In Malaysia, such change took place on May 9 this year. After 61 years of rule under Barisan Nasional (BN), the country decided to give Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad-led Pakatan Harapan an unexpected landslide victory.

The decisive win by the nonagenarian set the tone for a new Malaysia that has since made "change" as its mantra.

Moving at an urgent pace, the newly elected government has pledged to eradicate corruption, improve livelihoods and grant civic freedom to make Malaysia a better place.

A key member of this journey is lawmaker Gobind Singh Deo. The Puchong MP needs little introduction, thanks to the Tiger of Jelutong who raised him.

Gobind made history when he became the first Sikh federal minister on May 21 — making Malaysia the third country in the world, after India and Canada to have Sikhs as ministers.

"I consider myself as one of the lucky ones, and that means the expectations are very high. But I am prepared to give my everything to try and make this work," Gobind said in an hour-long interview with *The Malaysian Reserve*.

Tasked with the communications and multimedia portfolio, the 45-year-old politician is paving the nation's way forward through nationwide access to high-speed Internet, with hopes of making it a constitutional right in the country.

From Opposition to Cabinet

At his office on the top floor of the Communications and Multimedia Ministry in Putrajaya, Gobind narrated his "surreal" experience of walking into the Cabinet meeting room for the first time.

"I'd never been to the PM's Office prior to the appointment, so the first day we went there, I didn't know where the room was," said the newly elected minister.

When he did find his way eventually and sat in the Cabinet meeting, the practicing lawyer of 22 years realised the massive responsibility at hand.

"The whole country is relying on a group of people to make the right decisions which will take this country forward. That, to me, indicates that expectations are high," he said.

Gobind first entered the Parliament in 2008 amid a major swing towards the Opposition in Selangor.

He has since kept his seat as Puchong MP for three consecutive terms, winning the May 9 election by a thumping 47.63 majority against Gerakan's Ang Chin Tat and PAS' Mohamad Rosharizan Mohd Rozlan. Gobind, known among the Sikhs as the "little lion of Puchong", is the son of the late Karpal Singh, a respected figure in the local political arena, who last served as the chairman of DAP.

Following the footsteps of their father, Gobind and three of his siblings hold key positions within DAP, a



Mounted on the wall behind Gobind's working desk is a hand-painted picture of his late father Karpal, who last served as the chairman of DAP

component party of the Pakatan Harapan coalition.

Now charting new territories of his own, Gobind, a father of three children, wished his father was around to witness the historic shift in the country's political landscape.

"I miss him," he admitted. "There is no one like him. He was my father, a great mentor and a friend."

Mounted on the wall behind his working desk is a hand-painted picture of Karpal in a wooden frame.

"I can imagine him telling us to get back to work if he was still alive," Gobind said of the political legend.

Despite his father's absence, his appointment as the new communications and multimedia minister has received tremendous support from Malaysians, especially the Sikh community.

The Future of Malaysia

With the Internet being put at the heart of a future global digital economy, Malaysia has to ensure that it has the necessary infrastructure to connect digitally at levels that are on par with the rest of the world.

In urban China, cash has become obsolete as almost everyone is using their smartphones to pay for nearly everything. Even buskers on the streets have QR (quick response) codes for passers-by to transfer tips.

City dwellers in Malaysia are still far from being as tech savvy as their counterparts in Beijing, but the nation is working towards that direction. It has to — and this is where Gobind's ministry comes in.

"This is a very challenging portfolio that really deals with the future of the country. This is not a ministry that deals with the present."

"It deals quite substantially in determining the direction of the country in the years to come and I am very committed to it," he said.

He believes the face of the economy will see significant changes in under five years as a direct result of the Internet.

"If we Malaysians do not have access to the Internet, then a lot of us will not be able to keep up with the times and we cannot compete. That will be a big problem for us."

Gobind has mooted for Internet access to be recognised as a fundamental human right in the country in turn. He compares the legal entitlement as equal to the people's right to education.

"We have come to the next phase which is really about the Internet. We need to have access to information quickly because everyone else around us has that advantage," Gobind said.

"In order to have the Internet, especially in rural areas, we need infrastructure."

Connecting to the Grid

The Pakatan Harapan government has promised to work towards achieving broadband connections that are

"twice the speed, half the cost".

The previous BN government under ousted former PM Datuk Seri Mohd Najib Razak had also committed to the same pledge a year ago via the Nationwide Fibreisation Plan (2017-2019). The blueprint aimed to expand the country's fixed broadband infrastructure.

However, it hit a snag earlier this year over disagreements on who should be awarded a sizeable incentive to fund last-mile fibreisation targeted mainly in rural areas.

It was last reported that Broadnet Networks Sdn Bhd, a relatively dormant company with the backing of some high-profile names, had been selected to receive the RM1.5 billion incentive.

However, in what has been perceived as a counter-attack, Telekom Malaysia Bhd (TM) and Tenaga Nasional Bhd (TNB) have teamed up to implement the national broadband agenda.

The national utilities company is banking on the plan to monetise its 12,000km high-speed fibres network, which runs along its transmission lines. TNB's network has not been put to commercial use and is mainly utilised for its internal systems. A deal with TNB is seen as a major catalyst to achieve better and cheaper broadband connectivity.

However, with Pakatan Harapan's ongoing attempt to disband industry monopolies, Gobind said his ministry will have to weigh the options at hand.

"The advantages exist with TNB, but there is the question of who TNB will work with and whether or not we want to encourage 'monopoly', so to speak, or we want to encourage competition."

"Therefore, I think we will be particular when it comes to competitive pricing, as well as the quality of services provided," he said.

The downside of opening the tender to other telecommunications companies is the need to lay new fibre-optic cables underground and that has seen red tapes at the state level.

"If they want to lay the fibres, they have to deal with the states. Some have complained there are a lot of resistance from them because when you lay fibre cables along landmarks, it comes under the jurisdiction of the states, so they have their own regulation," Gobind said.

He plans to meet with state representatives individually to request for bureaucratic ease on the project. However, no timeline was given.

A Question of Monopoly

The question on whether to defend or fight against industry monopolies appears to have no definitive answer for the ministry at the moment.

Unlike the Ministries of Health, Agriculture and Transport, which are all part of the recently established Cabinet committee that deals with de-monopolisation, Gobind appears

to be taking a more equitable approach to address the matter.

He denied that the issue was viewed with less concern under his ministry and said the priority was to improve services.

"If that involves dealing with monopolies and inviting competition, then of course, in that sense, that will be a priority."

"But to look at a telco and say if it is a monopoly or not, we will have to look at what it does. In some areas, if there are other telcos that can do the same or better, then we should encourage competition," he explained.

In the case of TM, while the national service provider is listed on Bursa Malaysia, government-related entities hold the majority of its shares.

Data on Bloomberg showed the government's ownership in TM stood at 59.08%, with sovereign wealth fund Khazanah Nasional Bhd as a major shareholder with 26.2%. The Employee's Provident Fund trails behind with a holding of 18.1%.

In addition to that, the Finance Ministry also owns a "special share" which gives the government liberty to ensure TM's major decisions are in line with state policies.

"Personally, I would advocate against monopolies simply because I would rather encourage competition."

"With competition, you will see competitiveness in terms of reduction in prices and costs wherever possible. In addition, you will see efforts to improve quality."

"On the other hand, there is this old argument where some areas can only be given to TM due to their expertise. Thus, they should carry on as the main service provider. At the moment, we are looking at all these angles," Gobind said.

The Ineffectiveness of MCMC
Another area the minister will look into is the various agencies — some with bloated workforce — under the Communications and Multimedia Ministry.

With the national debt tallied at RM1 trillion, cost-cutting decisions are made with almost immediate effect across all ministries and government-linked entities.

The government has so far abolished the Special Affairs Department, which comes under Gobind's ministry, due to the agency's irrelevant nature of being BN's propaganda vehicle.

Another agency that is under close watch is the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC).

The industry regulator has been ineffective, according to Gobind, in dealing with various data breach and cyber attacks in the country, including the BOTS (Internet robot) attack on polling day.

Within last month alone, three separate data breaches were reported. "You notice when these breaches

occur, it was me who tweeted about it almost immediately? Do you not find it strange that the minister himself has to tweet about it when it first happened?"

"The question is, is this agency (MCMC) efficient in dealing with the problem?"

"The answer is 'No,'" Gobind said firmly. He viewed the attacks as a serious national concern and has told the MCMC to buck up.

"People hear that there is a problem, and we read about there being an investigation, but subsequently there is no follow up. This is the problem," Gobind said, adding that he will call for a separate press conference on the BOTS attack issue once the full report is completed.

In the meantime, the ministry is said to be reviewing a proposal to have a national firewall plan to address growing cyber threats in Malaysia.

"Various options have been put forth, but the firewall solution is something we are looking at. In doing so, we also have to make sure there are no external causes involved in the problem," the minister confirmed.

New Regulations to Combat Fake News

Gobind reaffirmed Pakatan Harapan's commitment to repeal the contentious Anti-Fake News Act 2018.

He said the government will also review laws such as the Sedition Act 1948, the Printing Presses and Publications Act 1984, the Penal Code and others that deal with fake news.

He said the "Act will be repealed and it will not be replaced as it is".

Instead, the government will introduce new forms of regulations that deal with the growing fake news phenomenon.

Gobind, however, did not disclose whether the new regulations will be in the form of new law or amendments to the existing laws.

"Currently, there are already laws in existence which can deal with it. That is the reason why I am quite comfortable with repealing it because it is not the case where it will be free for all afterwards."

"When we repeal it, we will fall back to the laws that are present, and then we will relook at the entire thing to see how we can improve them and put new provisions which are consistent with those in other countries," he said.

New Govt, Veteran PM

It has been just over a month since Gobind took office on May 22, and he said while the new government is facing various challenges, things have generally gone well.

"There is a lot of mindsets that need to change in every ministry and I think that is the first hurdle we need to get past. But so far, I am settling in quite well with everyone here."

"We are a new government and we have our own agenda, our own priorities, and I think everybody here has to understand that. At the end of the day, it is the people who come first and we must deliver our promises," he said.

When asked about his opinion on working with Dr Mahathir, Gobind said he finds it interesting to work with the 92-year-old leader and testified to his qualities as a "good administrator".

"Working with Dr Mahathir, I must say he listens. There are always discussions at Cabinet meetings. He is a PM that allows his ministers to speak openly."

"There are times when we disagree with some of his ideas and time when he disagrees with our ideas, but he gives full opportunity for everyone to speak up and ultimately, it is a collective decision that is made," Gobind said.

"It has been good working with the team."