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Keeping graft out of our culture

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TWICE in eight days, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has spoken about corruption.

Last Sunday, speaking on the occasion of Umno's 51st anniversary, he called on party members to help check social problems, especially corruption.

The Prime Minister and Umno president said although corruption had not reached a critical level, which he referred to as the bisa diatur stage, the Government is determined to tackle the problem, fearing that the people could one day accept corruption as part and parcel of the local culture.

Dr Mahathir's statement carries a very special meaning as it came a day after the Umno supreme council meeting decided that the former Selangor Menteri Besar, Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib, would cease to function as Umno vice-president and would not be involved in the activities of the council until the conclusion of his court case in Australia.

Dr Mahathir later told the Press that Umno would not tolerate or protect those involved in corruption, regardless of their positions in the party or Government.

Muhammad was charged in a Brisbane court with failing to declare cash amounting to RM2.4 million at the city's airport on Dec 22, 1996.

To advance Dr Mahathir's statement a bit further, we can safely say that for now the majority of the people do not accept corruption as part and parcel of Malaysian culture.

The Prime Minister said corruption should not be allowed to reach a stage where it was no longer regarded as an "under the table" activity but accepted as normal practice.

I am sure Dr Mahathir had not intended to say that we should be satisfied with keeping corruption under the counter. Like all of us, he too wants corruption to be eradicated.

This is amply evident when, on Tuesday, he told the Dewan Negara that action would be taken against government leaders who led a lifestyle beyond what they could reasonably afford based on the income (and assets) they declared when they were appointed.

He said leaders must not only be clean but must also be seen to be clean, adding that it was for this reason that he repeatedly emphasised the need for political leaders to avoid a situation where others could accuse them of being corrupt.