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Power and class linked to graft

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PROFESSOR Syed Hussein Alatas and Dr Chandra Muzaffar are to be congratulated for their contributions to the debate on corruption. I would like to contribute to the discussion based on my experiences and research I undertook while in government service and at Universiti Sains Malaysia.

I will deal with this question from three major perspectives which cannot be mutually exclusive. They are:

- * Concentration of political power,
- * Social class, and,
- * Rising level of expectations, needs vs wants.

Why would people want to corrupt and why would others allow themselves to be corrupted? These are complex questions, so I emphasise that this discussion is strictly limited to the aspects as above.

First, the concentration of political power. This means certain people have the monopoly of decision-making powers. So, in spite of existing accountability procedures, they still influence, decide and implement decisions on their own.

It follows that others who don't have such powers, but wish to have decisions made in their favour, must find a way to achieve this goal. When others are also competing for the same interest, it becomes even more important that a way must be found quickly.

The structure of decision-making at this level would involve politicians at Federal, State and local government, although senior officials of the bureaucracy may also have similar powers.

It seems clear that corrupting decision-makers is the obvious way. At the last Umno general assembly, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said that because they had the monopoly of political power, some members were prone to corruption.

There is a provision to raise matters in Parliament but as one businessman said to me, "Why have opposition when you can resort to corruption?" He said that because the monopoly of power and the enforcement machinery was primarily in the hands of the Malays, corruption could be a way of maintaining racial harmony.

He was critical of Opposition members who, by harping on such questions, created unnecessary tension between racial groups.

It's well known that the process of corrupting "officialdom" has almost become a fine art. Cartoonist Lat recently captured something of this art in a caricature of the election of a new Selangor Menteri Besar.

From the scope and depth of corruption as reported in the Press, at least since the 1990s, one might even say there's a culture of corruption.

By this, I include people who believe in "greasing the palms" of those in authority, even before they actually need approvals to get things done.

While serving as a State department head, I recall the concern when a newly transferred senior State Secretariat official arrived with a reputation for being "incorruptible".

Some businessmen visited the State where this officer had previously served to find out what his "weaknesses" were. Apparently they were successful in their inquiry.

This question of "buying influence up front" need not be so blatant. One only needs to examine appointed company directors to see no mere coincidence that VIPs, retired senior bureaucrats, police and army officers and, in some cases, even their children (when they themselves

have died) have been nominated as directors.

I do not propose to suggest specific "prescriptions" as to how to address this problem. One way is to decentralise decision-making powers through institutional reform. We must realise that the Government inherited a highly centralised political system and although the Constitution does provide for devolution of powers, the mechanism of decision making through the bureaucracy is still centralised.

Available literature in contemporary situations suggests that the bureaucracy has become so powerful as to even undermine or frustrate the political process.

What is worrying is the ineffectiveness of existing institutional safeguards. For someone to suggest that Anti-Corruption Agency officers be placed permanently at certain agencies and that government appoint "spies" to report on corruption seems to suggest that the situation has gone out of control.

If it comes to this, I believe that despite the obvious dangers involved, serious attention should be given to the possibility of the military being given a "watchdog" role in decision-making, at least as a temporary measure to "shake up" the system.

I should like to share the limited experience of working during the period of the National Operations Council after Parliament was suspended in 1969.

Although Dr Argoes Salim, the secretary of the Council would be the best person to comment on this suggestion, I believe it fair to say that senior military officers proved invaluable in making the administration of government more serious, disciplined, effective, and above all, accountable.

Insufficient recognition has been given to the fact that without their contribution, the process of reverting to parliamentary government would have taken much longer.

Second, social class. Closely connected to concentration of power is the reality of social class positions. This means that groups monopolising power positions project themselves as a select or elite class on the basis of traditional leadership positions, elected members of the Federal and State governments or nominated members of local government or government officials.

They dominate the decision-making process on the basis that they are the most legitimate or most "qualified" persons. In other words, those groups or individuals outside this elite class should not involve themselves in matters in which they are not qualified, especially in decision making.

In my "grassroots" research - from the rural development Red Book, early Felda schemes, the World Bank padi double-cropping project to the Johor and Pahang Tenggara master plans - it was clear that the above elite groups functioned as dominant groups making decisions, so that those not involved merely existed as subordinate groups.

For instance, almost all positions on committees at kampung, district and State levels were filled by nomination and not by election, except in the case of elected members of Parliament. This meant that opposition political parties in these areas were not represented.

Also, Wanita and youth groups were rarely, if ever, represented. The decisions made by these elite groups, therefore, could not be challenged.

All massive public expenditure projects under the rural development programme, as well as specific projects indicated above, were channelled through these committees at State and district levels. The corruption "implications" are not hard to see.

Moreover, decisions on what projects to recommend were not always what the people wanted.

And third, rising levels of expectations, needs vs wants. This aspect more specifically asks why some people allow themselves to become corrupted.

The question centres on expectations of the quality of life which has become "warped" by the massive intervention of television and other mass media, especially by what has been termed the "creation of desire". Excessive emphasis on consumption has resulted in a revolution of rising expectations of endless wants rather than reasonable needs.

The widening gap between the "have a lot" and the "have a little" in terms of extreme differences in lifestyles has greatly aggravated the temptation to become corrupted.

This scenario is not confined to urban areas.

The "direct-selling" strategy, which has penetrated rural areas and small towns, has led to widespread indebtedness, particularly through hire-purchase arrangements.

People whose incomes are low but are in a position of some authority are vulnerable to corruption to meet excessive financial commitments.

One must recognise that even basic needs like housing, food, education, transport and other necessities are increasingly expensive. In situations of changing lifestyles which normally accompany modernisation, it is sometimes difficult to draw the line between necessity and luxury.

It is not so much a matter of merely trying to increase low incomes. The more pertinent question is what this income can buy.

There has been much talk about consumer price indices but one wonders whether there has been a study on minimum standards.

Also, despite the commendable policies of the Government to eradicate poverty - to directly intervene in the construction of low-cost housing and other measures to alleviate the socio-economic plight of the lower-income group - other areas also need to be addressed.

For instance, workers have clamoured for a basic wage which could be based on a study of minimum standards. Also, certain wage earners, notably those in the plantation sector, do not enjoy a fixed monthly wage.

The rationale is that at least if those in the low income groups can expect a basic wage and the plantation workers a fixed wage they would be better able to budget the family expenses.

And hopefully, they will not get into situations where they become desperate to get extra money "by hook or by crook".

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