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Tackle corruption decisively

HE had said it before and he had said it again and again. And he repeats it in important fora. This time, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad raised the issue of corruption in his speech at the end of a forum, marking Umno's 51st anniversary on Sunday. Once again he reminded members to work hard to help check social problems, especially corruption. His plea was simple as it was blunt: "Don't let graft become part of local culture."

Dr Mahathir might have been speaking to party members. But he is also the Prime Minister and his speech should be heeded by all in the country. According a report, published two months ago, based on businessmen's perception, we are not the most corrupt nation in the world. Neither are we the least corrupt. We are somewhere in the middle of the list. Perhaps, this is the concern of Dr Mahathir when he said although corruption had not reached a critical stage, the Government was determined to tackle it before the situation became worse. He plucked a common Bahasa phrase, bisa diatur (can be arranged) to exemplify the issue of graft. The phrase is commonly used when there is a problem to be overcome and this is usually accompanied by certain financial compensation. If this phrase is widely used and becomes accepted as part of Malaysian life whether it involves sending our children to our preferred schools, securing plum jobs or party positions, getting compounds reduced or simply erased from computer databases or obtaining contracts for repainting a small school or building the proposed highway linking the three highland resorts, it becomes a canker that slowly gnaws away at the socio-economic fabric. Above all, it would replace moral values with cynicism, an attitude that avers that everything, including basic services, has a price. Which in turn would affect the quality of life of all Malaysians. Those who have, can get along; those who have not, would have to resort to measures of bisa diatur. We would have to pay to have refuse collected; to obtain any and all licences. In sum, the basic activity of living would have a price tag.

These clearly must have been in the mind of Dr Mahathir when he said a failure to tackle corruption ... would result in major problems. True, he was speaking at a party function and that the party would not tolerate or protect those involved in corruption, regardless of their position in the organisation. But some of these people would also occupy or would one day occupy positions in government. Inured to the culture of bisa diatur, they would not flinch from obtaining financial gains for normal government services such as land allocation and granting of approvals for projects, however small.

And Umno is the backbone of the Government. And if it has within its leadership some for whom obtaining financial compensation is a way of life, the entire Government would be tainted and would be perceived with cynicism. There would be a price to be paid on the management of the economy. And the whole country would suffer as a result. Greater would be the suffering among the lower income group. The gap between the haves and have-nots will widen. What sort of a quality of life would we then have?

Clearly then, Dr Mahathir was resolute when he said that the party would be firm in dealing with those involved in corrupt practices, regardless of their status, whether they were high or low ranking officials. That is the only way to tackle corruption quickly and decisively.

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