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Look into the causes of corruption

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WE have our problems like abuse of drugs, AIDS, HIV and, most recently, the financial and economic downturn from which we are now recovering. But another menace has reared its ugly head. And that is the cancer of corruption that has been growing and spreading for some time.

It threatens to undo the vast strides made in our socio-economic development of the last 30 years. We are not alone.

In China, corruption is such a serious crime that the death penalty has been prescribed. Many corrupt officials have actually been executed.

It was alleged corruption that mainly ended the 32-year rule of President Suharto of Indonesia in 1998. In the Philippines, the Marcos regime was corrupt and it has taken time to clean up.

The main reason for the military coup in Pakistan was that the politicians of both the major political parties which had been in power alternately were corrupt.

In Korea, two former Presidents who fell into disgrace were prosecuted and convicted on corruption charges and abuse of power.

Even Japan has not been spared financial scandals related to corruption.

President Tran Duc Luong of Vietnam, in his speech marking National Day on Sept 2, said: "We must firmly fight against corruption, bureaucracy, wastage and proceed urgently towards administrative reforms at all levels of the State."

Sadly, Thailand is in the process of giving up its fight against corruption because of what is described as "corruption fatigue".

According to a report, the Thai people have come to accept bribes, special favours and political connections as inevitable facts of life.

Businessmen describe bribes paid to civil servants for doing their job as "dog food"!. A study presented at a Civil Service Commission seminar on corruption found bribery in business as part of the nation's "tradition".

Corruption resulting in the fall of governments have also occurred in other parts of the world but, geographically speaking, Malaysia seems to be in the middle of a sea of corruption.

That we should not be similarly tainted prompted Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman to establish the Anti Corruption Agency in 1967. At that time the incidence of corruption in the public service was less than 0.1 per cent.

The Tunku wanted even this small element eradicated and preventive measures instituted so that corruption will not spread and take root.

A similar resolve was shown when Prime Minister Dato Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamed formed his first Government in 1981 with the motto, Bersih, Cekap dan Amanah.

That resolve has not apparently wavered in Dr Mahathir's disapproval of money politics; in the enactment of the Anti Corruption Act of 1997 with enhanced powers of investigation and culpability of corrupt offences; and his insistence that the new Menteri Besar of Selangor should be young, well educated and above all, clean in all respects.

The Government's determination for a "Clean, Efficient and Trustworthy" Government was reaffirmed last week by Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi when he said that the Government is looking for new ways to fight graft in the civil service.

On the ground, however, the painful fact is that for the last 15 years, corruption in both the public and private sectors has been on the increase

and in some cases quite blatant.

Housing developers speak freely of "must pay" to get things done in local authorities and land offices. Whatever the truth of these allegations, the public seems resigned to the fact of its existence.

True, those who know better, should report any demand for a bribe to the ACA but for reasons of expediency and convenience many do not. They just pay and grumble and say that is the way to do business.

Perhaps the disclosure by the ACA of the RM40 million scam in the issue of 100,000 fake driving licences should be the clarion call that the time has arrived for the Government to go all out to stamp corruption in all its forms.

Political will is essential and to start with, our political masters must themselves lead by example. They should not only be clean but be seen to be clean. If the head of the fish is rotten, then the rest of the fish is bad. There is a danger, however, that we have been attending to the symptoms but overlooking the causes of corruption.

A Royal Commission of Inquiry on Corruption should be appointed to examine the causes of corruption and recommend appropriate measures to eradicate and prevent corrupt practices.

In the meantime, the ACA should speed up its investigations and, more importantly, corruption cases should be heard by the courts as a matter of top priority.

We can no longer pretend that Malaysia is free of corruption.

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