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Evil made manifest

EVEN the best democracies find it difficult to square the self-sacrifice and poverty of public service with the nexus of wealth and power. Money's corrupting influence on lawmaking and the electoral process is a sore issue with voters almost everywhere. They get even sorer when they realise they can do little to prevent its pervasive encroachment into political life. Democracy is an expensive business. But money in pursuit of intangible goods is subject to the law of diminishing returns: beyond a certain point, it buys nothing.

Voters know that a great deal of money sloshes around in power politics. And they close an eye when it enhances democratic choice and funds popular mobilisation. But that ambivalence vanishes when politics begins to look like a grubby form of showbiz. Money denominates class. It separates and divides. Showing money off separates and divides absolutely, for all to see. You can fool people some of the time, but you can't fool them to vote for you to get rich in their faces.

Umno, as the country's largest, most historic and best-organised political party, suffers from money politics in direct proportion to its success. It attracts talented black sheep into its structure and support base. They covet Datukships and other entitlements through patronage. Last year's sanctions by the party disciplinary committee on a number of leaders for improper campaign financing during party elections meant that political graft could no longer be stowed away from public view. In May, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad anchored money politics among his "eight deadly sins". Without money, the other seven - greed, revenge, hate, jealousy, blind loyalty, opportunism, selfishness - would count for much less.

Money pays for but debases politics. Pas' dubious timber concessions in Kelantan and Terengganu reduce them to corruptible mortals willing to make Faustian deals to retain power. Government leaders who flaunt their wealth do even worse. If money is a necessary evil in politics, then putting it on ostentatious display, together with premature and unmerited honorifics, makes the evil manifest. By turning themselves into a moneyed upper caste, politicians will alienate those they are meant to court and serve.