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Honouring the incorruptible

IN the Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index 2002, Malaysia was ranked 33rd out of 102 countries, and fifth in Asia - a position that can and must be improved.

"Perceptions" can be a biased barometer and a poor stand-in for more quantitative measures of graft. But there is a widespread hunch that although Malaysia has not reached the stage where corruption has become an accepted way of life, there are, as the Prime Minister said on Saturday, "many Malays and Malaysians who see corruption as an easy way to get rich".

Corruption is not acceptable because it offends the beliefs and traditions of Malaysian society. It also destroys trust in society and its institutions, undermines faith in democracy, increases the cost of doing business, and exacts a heavy toll on development.

As Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad rightly pointed out, "Corruption cannot be fought through laws and punishment alone. The most effective weapon against corruption is discipline and good values." Without these, bribery will become institutionalised, by which time its eradication will involve more than personal valour: "It will take a giant of a man to try and he would probably fail."

The three personalities awarded the posthumous national integrity awards by Transparency International Malaysia - Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman, Tun Tan Siew Sin and Tun Ismail Ali - demonstrated how integral moral and ethical values were in their exemplary lives of selfless and incorruptible public service. Their children testify to how they have tried to pass on the virtues of honesty, integrity, frugality, and moral rectitude.

The Government has demonstrated its commitment and political will to confronting corruption. It has recognised the need to raise its standards of transparency and accountability, and to strengthen the judiciary and law enforcement. However, containing corruption is a continuing process which involves not only government institutions but also the private sector, civil society and the public. The givers must be made as culpable as the takers.

Since the family is the basic incubator and transmitter of values, the fight against corruption must begin from this basic unit of society. All are part of the problem, and all have a part to play in its solution.