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When the sleaze hits home

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ON Monday evening I advised a potential candidate for one of the three Umno vice-presidential slots up for grabs next year not to consider running unless he was wealthy or had rich backers.

The incumbents are rich - how rich depends on whom you speak to - but one of them will rise to become deputy president when Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi moves to the top. The hot favourite is Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak. At least two hopefuls are building up their funds to prepare for a contest.

The potential candidate is better educated, more experienced and perceived to be cleaner than some of the hopefuls. He was as frank as I was to him. But he has no slush fund!

In the United States, slush funds are used for various purposes, nefarious as well as excusable (like supplementing the incomes of key supporters, an increasingly common occurrence in Malaysia). It's amoral but smart politics.

The shady use of money in politics used to be called merely graft or corruption. In the last decade or so, the perpetration of bad deeds under cover of respectability, power and prestige came to be known as "sleaze".

This definition makes it more wide-spread than you think and adds the corollary that you shouldn't be surprised when it happens where you least expect it. No one is immune, not even our heroes.

Hanky-panky has come to be taken for granted in politics, big business, sometimes in the civil service and, sadly, even in the religions of the world. But sleaze has also invaded that noble endeavour, sports.

And it's not just the big-money events, such as horse-racing and boxing. Athletics and, yes, cricket have been rocked by scandal. I remember being struck by Carl Lewis's comment on fellow Olympic sprinter Linford Christie's positive test for the banned substance nandralone: "They got him at last."

In 1974, after a long battle in the courts, they got President Richard Nixon over Watergate at last. The relief of a final reckoning even extends to former South Korean president Kim Dae Jung, a paragon of his country's democracy, now being held to account for bribing North Korea to attend a summit.

At long last, and no matter how long, even the highest and mightiest will have to answer to those they have wronged. Our trust in our morality, our institutions, laws and leaders depends a great deal on the simple belief that their day of judgment will come. They may elude us, but not the retribution of their Maker.

We ought to be able to make Lewis's comment more often, rather than stew in our suspicions and cynicism. There has been sleaze in Malaysian politics, going by the slightly less detestable term "money politics". Money has become so integral to all mass democracies that both its sources and recipients have become murky.

Even stylishly fastidious democracies such as France and Germany have not escaped its lure. America is up to the eyeballs in it, as we all know. Britain, under the once anti-capitalist Labour Party, has gone green with it. Name me a big democracy that hasn't been infected by sleaze, and I'll believe that Santa Claus exists.

Obviously, the more desperately politicians covet power, the fewer scruples they'll have about the means to obtain it. In the past, with

party hierarchies and support bases largely secure, political sleaze in this country never went big time.

Little wonder then that the biggest such instance came to light as an outcome of the country's richest party going through the greatest crisis in its history.

The party was, of course, the MCA. After the sudden resignation of president Datuk (now Tan Sri) Lee San Choon in 1983, two factions arose to compete for control - one led by acting president Datuk Neo Yee Pan, the other by a talented businessman and party vice-president, Tan Koon Swan.

Tan eventually won an election hands down in 1985. He was very popular, but his business dealings left him exposed to the ups and downs of the stock market in Kuala Lumpur and Singapore. He also headed the MCA investment arm, Multi-Purpose Holdings, which left him open to moral hazard and conflicts of interest.

Soon after he took over the party presidency, Tan's corporate empire crashed. He was jailed in both Singapore and Malaysia for criminal breach of trust in connection with the spectacular collapse of one of his listed companies, Pan-Electric Industries.

By the time he resigned as MCA president in 1986, however, he had accomplished a lasting service to his fractious party. The MCA recovered steadily under his proteges, led by his former deputy, Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik.

Dr Ling's exhortation to his party on Sunday to staunch money politics was especially poignant when seen against the backdrop of Tan's fall from grace. The MCA, renowned in its early days as a lobby of towkays united in the protection of Chinese economic interests, has always been susceptible to accusations of money politics.

The stock-in-trade of its nemesis, first the People's Action Party (when Singapore was part of Malaysia) and then the Chinese left-wing DAP, had once been to pitch it into the wrong end of the rich vs. poor divide.

The truth is that the MCA has never lost the hard-headed business-mindedness of its founders. It reinforced its appeal after the New Economic Policy less by ideology than by tapping into Chinese wealth in an ever-widening circle, most notably through co-operatives.

This was an innovative and highly successful way to give the Chinese a stake in both the party and the national economy. But it also gave rise to the Tan Koon Swan affair and a reputation the party had persistently to live down.

The bigger reason for poignancy in Dr Ling's statement is the impression of history repeating itself: the MCA is once again faction-ridden and embroiled in a protracted leadership struggle that is becoming as intense as the Tan-Neo crisis.

Both Dr Ling and party secretary-general Datuk Seri Dr Ting Chew Peh, at the spearhead of the Team A faction, used strong words on the occasion of the party's 54th anniversary in Johor Baru.

The words were no doubt meant to ring loudest in the ears of the opposing Team B, headed by deputy president Datuk Seri Lim Ah Lek and vice-president Datuk Chua Jui Meng.

Dr Ling cushioned his statement by saying that money politics was not yet a "serious" problem. In fact, some of the practices he alluded to, such as lavish dinners and junkets, have been an MCA staple, if not a mark of Chinese business culture, and an effective substitute for the rougher forms of political campaigning.

Dr Ling's critics would thus find it difficult to take his admonition outside of the context of the Team A-Team B contest. But he was right to warn that the party would be doomed if it remained disunited and if that disunity led to the use of money in ever-increasing amounts.

For the MCA, as well as the rest of the Barisan Nasional, the fear of disunity is greater today than it had been before. Without the compelling incentive of a strong Opposition party - the DAP appears to be in irreversible decline - factional rivalry could indeed spell doom.

Money politics had been most pervasive in Umno when the party was at its strongest. It took the stern intervention of party president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and the challenge of Pas to bring it down to acceptable levels.

Because it can hide easily under the umbrella of good causes, sleaze in politics is difficult to prosecute, much less uproot. But its symptoms are there for all to see: in luxury cars, palatial bungalows, expensive jewellery and overseas holiday retreats and in the perks and posh shindigs accorded to supporters.

It can't be slowed to a halt unless we have the faith, the political will and the means to say that "they will get him at last".

Money politics is a euphemism for cynical or dishonest dealing, practices that are corrupt and criminal as well as legitimate and honourable.

Money talks; big money wins contracts, votes and makes people pragmatic - reversing their position on a candidate they had steadfastly opposed - as well as builds schools, even mosques, temples and churches.