

Break the code, pay the price
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'He who is deaf, blind and silent will live a hundred years in peace'.

So says a Sicilian proverb. Not surprisingly, it's the Italian Mafia which has perfected the culture of 'omerta' – a code of silence which protects crime bosses from the long arm of the law.

For the Mafia, breaking the 'omerta' is punishable by death. In Malaysia, it's done with a little more finesse, but is no less effective.

Here, anyone who breaks this code faces the dreaded 'cold storage' treatment where a person is suspended - unofficially - from his or her job.

Mohamad Ramli Abdul Manan has paid that price dearly. Despite being one of the most senior officers in the Anti-Corruption Agency, he was without a desk - let alone an office - for six years until his retirement.

His crime? Accusing his own boss, Zulkipli Mat Noor, of corruption.

Indeed, we are so deprived of real heroes that whenever someone like Ramli walks by, they are immediately hailed as one.

Ramli would himself concede that he's an unlikely paladin. A typical civil servant, he prefers to retire in peace. However, he's not getting any of that. Especially not after his pension has also been put in 'cold storage'.

He now has to make ends meet by working part-time when he should be out playing golf or tennis, his favourite sports.

Cash-and-carry politicians

For the ACA, it couldn't have gotten any worse - the country's top graft fighter was being accused of corruption and that too by a senior officer from within the body itself.

Thus it's no wonder that having extended Zulkipli's contract - not once but four times - Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi had to finally put an end to the ACA chief's 'sterling performance'. Clearly, the contract's expiry date was bumped up a few months to allow a dignified exit for Zukipli.

In so doing, the government hopes the ugly stain on the ACA's image will simply fade away. Which really means we can expect the probe on Zulkipli to be given the 'cold storage' treatment too.

But Abdullah still has one other problem.

Days after Ramli's accusation made headline news, another major scandal broke -

the prime minister's own deputy in the Internal Security Ministry, Mohd Johari Baharum, was hit with the allegations that he took bribes from underworld figures to free a number of detainees.

This has led to a situation bordering on the absurd - the embattled ACA has been tasked to investigate the deputy minister while the police, whose boss is the deputy minister, are probing the ex-ACA boss, who was once a top cop.

Confused? Don't worry, you're not going to miss anything.

There are further scandals - the confession of a collaborator to corruption involving senior civil servants and the litany of allegations involving Sabah Chief Minister Musa Aman, both of which were carried by malaysiakini.

But unlike earlier scandals, the mainstream media has curiously observed a code of silence on these new cases.

This was after stern warnings from the government to ignore reports on the Internet. It goes to prove, yet again, that the government has the power to turn the mainstream media on and off, much like flipping a switch. All said, corruption goes beyond our cash-and-carry politicians and their buddies in the civil service and the corporate world.

It goes all the way to the top. The man who is leading the charge against graft - the prime minister himself - shows that he has no qualms in dabbling in what many would consider corrupt practices.

Examples abound. But take just this one - the case of the RM600 million bonanza for Abdullah's own party. Each Umno division got RM3 million late last year to go on a spending spree, much of it flowing into companies linked to local party chieftains.

It's already unfair to deprive opposition-held areas from the RM2 million annual development fund allocation which each BN member of parliament gets. Now, with an election around the corner, more taxpayers' money is being poured into BN constituencies. If this is not vote-buying, pray tell, what is?

Same tired, old excuse

If Abdullah is truly serious about fighting graft, he doesn't really have to do much. This step alone should suffice - made public the assets declaration of all cabinet ministers, an action we had demanded in wake of his sweeping victory in 2004.

But he knows it cannot be done. Otherwise, half the cabinet would perhaps end up in prison.

Abdullah has argued, time and again, that he needs, yes, more time. This is becoming a tired old excuse.

Expect him to ask for another five-year term to finish the job he has so far failed to do. Some may buy that argument. But surely one cannot ask for more time to complete tasks left undone because of one's incompetency?

If not now, when? Another one hundred years? Most of us won't live that long even if we heed the Sicilian proverb. And that's only if we plan to stay deaf, blind and silent.

Ramli obviously doesn't. Not me either. Do you?

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