

Money for politics: PSC must lead reform
Malaysiakini.com
October 01,2011
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COMMENT Political financing is not a popular subject and many taboos exist. Most, if not all, politicians avoid addressing this subject publicly for fear of negative perception.

However, this is a pressing issue among many honest politicians from both sides of the political divide. It is like an elephant in the living room.

Like it or not, politicians and political parties need money to run effective campaigns and serving their electorates. The more intense the political environment becomes, the more the money needed.

This is especially true for Pakatan Rakyat as we have neither state-owned TVs nor mainstream media providing fair coverage for us.

During the State Assembly sitting on May 4, 2011, I had raised this issue to the Penang government. Please read the draft of my Dewan Speech 14.0 to 22.0:

azlanBased on the report today, the ruling Umno-BN has proven again that they lack the political will to reform.

The former EC chairman Abdul Rashid Abdul Rahman (left) has revealed that the ruling federal government had rejected a proposal to reform political financing by providing state funding to political parties.

Clarion call for political will

The excuse given was "Malaysia will be crowded with political parties taking advantage of the funding". To me, this is an utterly lame excuse.

I vehemently urge the prime minister to show his political will for reforms. Several organizations, including Transparency International, have approached him pertaining to this matter.

He once remarked that he wanted Malaysia to be "the best democracy". The propitious moment has arrived for him to walk the talk.

I also, hereby, urge the Parliament Select Committee on Election Reform to discuss and introduce state-sponsored political financing to build a true democracy.

The parliament select committee (PSC) must be able to discuss wide-ranging and much needed electoral reforms in order to move Malaysia forward in its quest to become the so-called "best democracy" mentioned above.

For too long, political parties, especially Umno-BN, have relied heavily on dubious financial sources from lobby groups or parties with vested interests.

This has resulted in a deeply embedded culture of corruption and nepotism in the ruling BN government. Even former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad has admitted the existence of such dubious funding in his party.

Mad rush for political influence

In today's increasingly competitive political environment, political parties are racing with each other for more political influence.

They have to organize all kinds of activities such as open house, providing financial help to the poor and needy, political ceramah, print leaflets etc.

Like it or not, these activities incur expenses. It is also not very economically expedient in maintaining a service center, hiring of political aides and keeping party divisions running.

NONEThe killer part is during an election campaign when large amounts of funds are needed to meet inevitable expenses in a short period of time.

Political parties or political leaders, therefore, are in constant need of political funds. Many politicians are forced to raise money on a regular basis. Their sources of funding could come from small donations or larger corporate donations.

Many have donated sincerely without asking for favors but such sources could also inevitably open the possibilities of political lobbying by big corporations in time to come.

Those who do not raise money from the public are forced to spend their own and be financially burdened. This has deterred good people from joining politics.

I would like to reiterate my view that the PM and PSC must take lead to reform because electoral matters come are under federal jurisdiction.

On the other hand, the state governments held by Pakatan Rakyat could also explore such initiatives in accordance with the law.

I am well aware of the jurisdiction and legal challenges of such initiatives. The various state governments can set up committees to look into the legality and feasibility of such initiatives in electoral reforms.

In Penang, the state government needs to fork out only RM8 million to ensure fair play in elections. This small amount is a big step in improving democracy.

Path to healthy democracy

I am acutely aware of members of the public who might be skeptical of such an idea. They might not be supportive of using taxpayers' money for funding political activities.

Nevertheless this is just a small and necessary investment to keep politicians clean and to curb corrupt practices.

Therefore, for such idea to be accepted, we have to provide sufficient political education and public awareness campaigns. Political leaders and parties must now start discussing these issues to educate and change public opinion.

Malaysia must introduce political finance reforms to emerge as a healthy democracy. Malaysian political parties as well as politicians must break away from conventional methods of private donation.

The Parliament Select Committee on Election Reform must take the lead in suggesting the State-sponsored funding for political parties.

This will provide a level playing field for political parties and politicians to organize their activities and election campaigns. Tighter laws must be introduced to prevent dubious or covert political fundraising.

Furthermore, this will help attract more talents to join politics in future.

According to Prof Terence Gomez, 70 percent of democratic countries around the world have introduced state-sponsored political financing to prevent lobbying by funders. It is high time for Malaysia to follow suit.

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