

'Withholding allocations till election win is corruption'

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by Aidila Razak

Giving out only part of a government allocation and promising the rest only after a certain candidate wins an election is considered vote buying, said anti-corruption watchdog Transparency International Malaysia (TI-M) today.

Speaking to reporters after addressing the parliamentary select committee (PSC) on electoral reform during the public hearing today, TI-M president Paul Low (right) said that such a practice constitutes corruption.

"If you give RM3,000 now and then say, 'If I win, I will give the remainder RM3,000,' this is not a development fund. This is corruption," he said after the PSC's first public hearing.

Earlier, Low had proposed to the nine-person panel that organisations who ask for "donations" during political campaigns should also be prosecuted for selling their vote.

This was in response to committee member Fong Chan Onn (BN-Alor Gajah) who asked if organisations who "ask (for donations) or blackmail (candidates to give money for votes)" be prosecuted.

"During campaigns, candidates and political parties are often invited to schools or temples, and they will say unless given money, we won't vote," Fong said.

According to TI-M vote buying to be defined as any sort of enticement in the form of cash or cheque to voters "and saying you vote for me".

"In a (media) interview, the Election Commission (chairperson Abdul Aziz Yusof) said that giving money is not corruption, as we don't know whether the (recipient) votes for (the giver) or not.

"This is a wrong definition; as long as enticement of the individual occurs by the giving of money, it is improper," he told the panel chaired by Science, Technology and Innovation Minister Maximus Ongkili.

Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak had received severe fire last year for allegedly enticing voters during the by-election in May for saying during a ceramah at the Sibul by-election campaign that he would sign a RM5 million cheque for flood mitigation if the BN candidate won.

Caretaker government

TI-M also proposed the formation of a caretaker government during the election campaign, following the model of India which has a committee of eminent individuals take over from the cabinet once an election is called.

Alternatively, Low said the chief secretary can be placed as head of government during an election.

This was rebutted by Wee Choo Keong (Ind-Wangsa Maju) who contended that even advanced democracies like the United States do not have a caretaker government.

Low also raised concern over political financing, calling for legislation to compel political parties to disclose their sources of funding.

Otherwise, he said, parties will be beholden to individuals and companies who fund them, leading to closed tenders and corruption within the state.

Anthony Loke (DAP-Rasah) (left) said that while this idea is good in theory, it would cause problems for the opposition whose funders prefer anonymity for fear that their support will lead to a backlash from the state.

Additionally, the NGO called for state funding for political campaigning, following the German example where funds are disbursed proportionate to a party's popularity according to votes.

Answering Hatta Ramli (PAS-Kuala Krai), Low admitted that the German model will need to be tweaked to suit Malaysia as the republic follows a different electoral system.

TI-M also called for strict enforcement of electoral laws which limit the amount spent for political campaigns, and for the limit to apply to both the candidate and political party he or she represents.

The Election Offences Act 1954 limits the spending by candidates for state seats to RM100,000 and RM200,000 for parliament seats.

Low said that the Election Commission should take a more active role by prosecuting those who go above the limit, as did the Thai Election Commission which prosecuted then-prime minister Abhisit Vejjajiva for allegedly breaching the public spending limit on campaign advertising.

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