

ABC4Malaysians on graft
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Transparency International Malaysia (TI-M) has released the findings of the first perception survey by Malaysians, of Malaysians, and for Malaysians on the transparency and integrity of government agencies. The report concluded that corruption is still an acute, serious and real problem.

It looks like former premier Dr Mahathir Mohamad was right - corruption is now obviously above the table and visible for the world to see. Or, as Johor Bahru MP Shahrir Abdul Samad put it when officiating the launch, "the study confirmed what most Malaysians already know".

Our own research in our mould confirmed all our perceptions for the world to see. Nonetheless, like Shahrir, I have questions about the study and definitions of the concepts of transparency and integrity.

But I want to go a step further and argue that all Malaysians are against bribery and corruption but mainly at the level of political intent. As such, one clear and convincing idea that was proposed and agreed to by most present at the launch was that it is in fact the right time for a "people movement against corruption".

I support this call and will suggest that we all rally for what I describe as an 'ABC4Malaysians (Malaysians against Bribery and Corruption) Campaign'. In fact, the late Prof Dr Syed Hussein Alatas had advised me that "an anti-corruption campaign cannot become a government programme but must instead morph into a people's movement".

From the TI-M survey, about 75-90 percent of Malaysians interviewed (from the ordinary public, and corporate sector) and even those present at the launch would wholeheartedly support any specific and strategic agenda focused against corruption.

But we need to evolve political will for reform. Most of the respondents believe that three key initiatives can bring about such reform:

- Immediately blacklist for three years, all contractors who do not deliver on projects.
- Whistleblowers should be protected by law.
- An Ombudsman is badly needed but the person appointed should only report directly to Parliament.

The Ambassador of Finland, a speaker at the TI-M forum, explained why Finland tops the world's anti-corruption indices. It is mandated by law that every public servant and politician must publicly declare all interests before they take office. Now, is such a simple requirement so difficult to implement in Malaysia? It is not.

Rhetoric and reality

Those at the forum also agreed that the problem was lack of political will. In my language this is called lack of political intent. Yet others will argue, "but the Abdullah Administration made this the cornerstone of its political campaign for good governance!" Yes, but I would argue that it was only an espoused theory, based on the prime minister's personal and

preferential good intent, based on his own personal beliefs and values. Good intentions do not always translate to good governance. Remember the Bersih, Cekap dan Amanah slogan?

I would counter-argue and agree with the respondents that it is not yet a theory-in-use. To most Malaysians, Abdullah has spoken more than he has achieved. There has been more rhetoric than reality. Others will argue we must give him more time. I agree, but only until the next general election. The effect of his policy intent is not yet being felt on the ground - corruption on the ground has no fear yet!

Therefore, I would first conclude from the survey findings that the large majority of Malaysia is against corruption but do not believe there has been any change since Abdullah's promise.

Most still believe that he will fulfil his promise, especially civil servants who responded to the survey. Senior citizens and home makers still believe in his corruption agenda. But, this survey also confirms to me that the same large majority believe "not enough has been done to demonstrate a political will against corruption".

My second conclusion is that the government has not demonstrated political leadership and integrity in its fight against corruption. The delay in creating the independent police watchdog body alone is sufficient to make this case. Combined with my first conclusion, I would then argue that both political intent and political will to fight corruption are weak at the level of political leadership.

To my heart and mind, there may be only one exception to this condition: the new chief secretary to the government. I hear that his personal philosophy is 'zero-tolerance for corruption'. He has argued that "integrity is doing the right things even when no one is watching". But then again, as with Abdullah, we have to wait for his theory-in-use on this matter.

It will soon enough become evident though; after the secretaries-general fail to act against the many public servants against whom the Anti-Corruption Agency (ACA) has found insufficient evidence to charge in court, but against whom administrative action has been recommended. The chief secretary has given heads six months to take action. I will wait to see his theory-in-use.

Visible gap

The lack of public policy on integrity at the leadership level in government service formed the content of my first formal complaint to the parliamentary select committee on integrity on Feb 13 last year. I submitted this as a whistleblower and after 30 years of public service.

There is too often a serious and visible gap between policy intent, pronouncement and execution. That is in fact my definition of 'leadership integrity' in any organisation.

Let me take the simple case involving the private banking sector to make my case. Edward Lee, the Chairman of the All-PJ ProAction Committee, a coalition of about 45 residents associations, cited the case of the banking sector "demanding a RM10,000 bribe to approve a RM50,000 small business loan" at yesterday's event.

Obviously this is not part of the government's policy of developing entrepreneurs, but such

a practice is common in almost all government-linked funding programmes. My brother's company had a similar experience in applying for a Small- and Medium-Enterprises (SME) business loan a couple of years ago.

Where then is the fiduciary responsibility for leadership integrity on this matter? The government has announced a loan programme help SMEs with cash-flow problems. That is good policy intent. The government also declared that all SMEs qualify for the loan if they meet the requirements. That is policy pronouncement. The money is dispersed by the Ministry of Finance (MoF) via the banking sector.

But, when a SME operator applies for a loan, banks become 'brokers and agents' who help you fill up the forms and put up the required case, but for a fee. That is failure of policy execution. Sounds familiar? Well this is part and parcel of the rent-seeking culture for the more acute public services today.

Three parties to blame

Now, who should we hold responsible for this poor execution of a good and excellent programme?

First and foremost, I hold the relevant ministers as the fiduciaries and they should be held responsible for their jurisdiction of executive authority under the Ministerial Portfolio Act.

In this instance, it is MoF budget policy to extend assistance to SMEs in hard times. But why should there be layers of rent-seekers in-between? This was in fact exactly what the 'pest-control agenda' was under a previous MPSJ head.

What amazes me is that there is no political will to recognise corruption by the back-door and to call it what is really is. Most people can be fooled some of the time but surely nobody can be fooled all the time, as Abraham Lincoln pointed out.

Second, I would the secretaries-general or directors -general who have executive authority for all public policy intent.

Thirdly, all Malaysians must also take the rap for the dismal behaviour. As long as there is a giver, there will be a taker! Simply sign the pledge to never give, and the problem is resolved at the personal level, almost forever.

Exercise the mandate

The Sunday Star carried an excellent interview with Shahrir, who chairs the parliamentary Public Accounts Committee (PAC), during which he identified the principle of public accountability, and how the PAC views itself in the redefined role of ultimate custodian of 'public funds accountability'.

He commended the Minister of Finance II and articulated his approach to public accountability (they were course-mates in Universiti Malaya): "It is good the Minister came. I think Ministers should see it as an opportunity to talk directly to Parliament, because we are one of the standing committees of Parliament. And talking to a committee that is represented by all the political parties enhances our parliamentary role, integrity and accountability. I see it as exercising the mandate we obtained at the last election."

Yes, that is what is expected by independent observers like myself and all who argue for more transparency, openness and accountability of public funds - our money!

Shahrir also explained the PAC's role: "We are part of the Parliament's audit process in the sense that Parliament approves the budget and public expenditure. It is also necessary for Parliament to know how funds have been managed and spent. And Parliament does that through the PAC. Our role is clearly spelt out."

Thank you YB for gracing the TI-M function. We look forward to any feedback you have about the survey report after PAC members have studied it. Perhaps you could invite TI-M to discuss it with the PAC.

I believe this will be in the public interest. Those who gave Barisan Nasional its biggest electoral victory would like to see it keep the promise to curb corruption.

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