

Watching the watchdogs of corruption
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Critics of Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi who charge him with failing on his election promise to battle corruption in high places, say he might begin by affording protection to whistle blowers.

Indeed tackling graft - which latest opinion polls show is considered more important than rising inflation or shrinking jobs - is taking political centre stage not because of government action but because whistle blowers and anonymous bloggers exposing high level corruption find themselves facing great risks.

At issue is the case of Mohamad Mana Ramli, a senior officer in the Anti Corruption Agency (ACA), who has accused no less than the agency's head Zulkipli Noor of amassing a fortune by corrupt means and of sexual misdeeds.

Ramli's charges, levelled against the very man tasked with combating corruption, has shocked the nation.

"The faith of the public in politicians and civil servants has been eroding for a long time. For us to hear allegations of corruption against Zulkipli Noor is surely another blow," said the mass circulation the Star daily in a commentary published on March 4.

"It is certainly ironic. The man who is supposed to help wipe out corruption has found himself accused of being corrupt... the allegations are serious and the implications certainly explosive," the commentary said.

Rising public frustration

In the second incident, this month, an anonymous blogger posted a page on the Freewebs.com website alleging that Deputy Internal Security Minister Johari Baharum collected RM5 million (US\$1.42 million) to release three suspects from prison.

Both Noor and Baharum, now under investigation, have strenuously denied the charges against them and urged police to investigate their accusers.

The two cases indicate rising frustration in the public over lack of progress in combating crime and corruption. It also illustrates their willingness to take risks to expose corruption and other misdeeds to force the authorities to take action.

Senior government officials face serious risks when blowing the whistle on official graft especially when no official policy exists to protect them from departmental action. The government has failed to make laws to protect whistle blowers despite promises to protect their identities and reward them for the risks they take.

Ramli who fingered his boss is already in trouble despite the wide publicity given to the case. He told the independent malaysiakini news website that attempts were underway to discredit him by planting stories in the media that he too had been investigated. "The reports are all defamatory. I have never been investigated, this is malicious," Ramli was

quoted as saying. "These are attempts to tarnish my reputation and make my life difficult."

Likewise, bloggers are at the mercy of a government that is armed with numerous draconian laws against writers and publishers.

Wealth corporations frequently use multi-million dollar libel suits as weapons and last month two bloggers were sued by the official New Straits Times newspaper for defamation.

The case against the two has already had a chilling effect on the Internet community and the outcome will indicate the tolerance level of the establishment.

Problem acute and serious

A survey this month by the Malaysian chapter of the Berlin-based Transparency International (TI) showed that the majority of 1,400 people polled want greater protection for whistle blowers.

"The problem is acute and very serious," said Ramon Navaratnam, head of TI-Malaysia. Respondents to the survey said they would like to see the formation of an ombudsman on corruption and for the ACA to be placed directly under Parliament and not in the Prime Minister's Department.

The TI survey ranked the police force as the dirtiest, followed by the road transport and customs departments, reinforcing the findings of a royal commission in 2005 that found the police force the most corrupt of government departments.

The "longer the delay, the more doubt there would be, and the greater the erosion on the public perception of the government's intention to push forward with its policies of fighting corruption," Navaratnam said.

Nearly 80 percent of corporate leaders polled said there was little transparency in the awarding of tenders. More than the survey, graffiti scrawled on sidewalks and underpasses speak of the specific failure of Badawi to deliver on a promise to bring 18 prominent persons to book.

Like the graffiti writers, opposition lawmakers, human rights activists and even government backbenchers have been consistently piling pressure on Badawi to crack the whip. "The ACA director general himself is accused of corruption," said Steven Gan, editor of malaysiakini. "Can it get any worst than this?"

Critics say the only effective solution to the malaise is for Abdullah to place the ACA - which now reports to him directly - under an independent parliamentary committee with backbenchers and opposition lawmakers as members.

Unwilling to rock boat

But Abdullah, three years into his first term, is unable or unwilling to do that because that would mean confronting the powerful patronage system he presides over as chairperson of the ruling 13-party National Front coalition. He has admitted that stamping out the "cancerous" growth of graft is "not easy".

"In many ways corruption is institutionalised and is an integral part of the political and economic system," political analyst James Wong said. "Abdullah (Badawi) inherited the corrupt system. If he takes tough anti-graft measures he will rock the boat and that's the one thing he is unwilling or unable to do," Wong told IPS.

Public perception of lack of progress against graft is confirmed by the country's slide in international corruption indices including that of TI which put it at 44th place in its 2006 Corruption Perceptions Index, down five notches from 2005.

Despite his worsening record, Abdullah, a pious Muslim and the 'Mr Clean' of Malaysian politics, has defended the ACA. "The ACA is doing its best" is his frequently quoted answer to questions on its poor performance.

Abdullah cites as progress the fact that the ACA made over 1,500 arrests for corruption in 2006. "But most are ikan billis (small fry) or low-level officials," said parliamentary opposition leader Lim Kit Siang. "The big sharks of corruption are seldom caught."

In official circles, however, Abdullah is somewhat admired for admitting that rampant corruption exists when his predecessor Dr Mahathir Mohamad was in deep denial.

"You can't single out Prime Minister Abdullah and blame him alone. Graft is not a one man's fight...it is a cooperative battle," said prominent government backbencher Shahrir Samad. "Everyone must be involved in the process. "It takes time...his anti-graft campaign has to work itself through the system."

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