

Integration with integrity (Part 3)

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On Monday, I attended the third anniversary of the launch of the National Integrity Plan (NIP) and the Institute of Integrity, Malaysia (IIM), at which Deputy Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak and Commonwealth secretary-general Don McKinnon were guests of honour.

The NIP is available in two condensed forms - as a summary of the plan itself and in readable format aptly called 'From Roots to Fruits'. The fact is our integrity as a nation has to be built from the roots all over again.

If we are honest with ourselves, we have lost the traditional values that made us Malaya and then Malaysia and which have brought us this far for 50 years. Those traditional values always moderated the integration with integrity of the original social contract of 1957 and then 1963.

Today, we seem to have lost the gentle and genteel traditional Malay values. We have become more modernistic in our ways and often resort to force and compulsion. As with Mat Rempit, breaking the law no longer involves a sense of shame. We all do it willfully and almost with little fear.

Recently a senior government officer even advised me to "officially to break the law and seek a compound fine" for a particular problem. When necessary, we are willing and able to revert to the power paradigm; or the law of the jungle of brute force. May the best animal win!

This attitude of non-reason was made very clear by the Minister in the Prime Minister's Department when he answered a question at the end of the Forum on Integrity and Governance, from Tunku Abdul Aziz (photo), the first president of Transparency International-Malaysia.

He asked the minister why he had argued that the ACA cannot report to the Parliament simply because the government had an overwhelming majority in the two houses. That being the case, Tunku Aziz suggested that the ACA could possibly report to a parliamentary committee on integrity made up of all political representations, and that would be good enough.

The minister's answer was more puzzling. He repeated the argument that the select committee would have to be just as representational and therefore would again be made up of a majority of government members of Parliament.

I'm confused. Doesn't the minister understand something called the 'public interest'? Is the minister not aware of the role of Parliament, especially the role of its permanent committees? Does not the minister understand the difference between national interest and the public interest? The government of the day can always define the national interest based on the majority interest but the public interest must always transcend parochial party interests for the good for all Malaysians.

That is what I believe Vision 2020 seeks to define as a fully developed nation in our own mould. Surely, it was not framed for the interest of the top 30 percent of Malaysia; of even

just the simple majority of Malaysians. Serving the interests of all Malaysians is the fundamental role of Parliament, as a cardinal institution of democracy. And parliamentary committees are therefore non-partisan public interest sub-organs instituted precisely to protect the common interests of the ordinary public Malaysian.

Demonstrate intent

What therefore didn't the minister understand about the suggestion by Tunku Aziz, which is really an excellent one? The fundamental problem with the ACA is one of credibility. Although there have been some improvements, the overall sentiment among members of the public is that the ACA cannot be relied on to do an honest and professional job with a sense of urgency. We get the feeling that there are many bosses who have a say in the decision about the prosecution of the cases. There is a lack of a sense of perceived professionalism in the conduct of both investigations and prosecution.

If we are really serious about fighting corruption, improving transparency and better governance of this nation, there is no choice but for the prime minister to demonstrate this seriousness of intent by more fundamental and structural change. Launching the IIM was a good start. The chief secretary to the government reported that more than one million people have been touched in terms of awareness through the IIM's programmes. But as we all know, unless punishment of wrongdoing is equally fervent, the whole agenda of integrity might look only like whitewash over stains.

I find the minister's answer less than reasonable answer and his lame logic acceptable. Perhaps his argument makes sense to the cabinet, all of whom are power-brokers themselves, but to the ordinary man on the street, it is plain illogical. Implicit in his argument is the notion that the current system is good enough and that the ACA in its current form and structure does serve only the public interest.

But doubt has been cast on the ACA because of accusations (since denied) against its former head by a former senior officer. Is it not obvious that the government through the ACA had no political will to investigate corruption and nepotism in the case of former Klang councillor Zakaria Mat Deros? Should not the ACA investigate how a former railway gatekeeper could have amassed such wealth? Surely it is within the ACA's mandate to investigate the source of his wealth?

Then there are many, many government projects like the 'computer labs' fiasco. Have they all been investigated? Surely the ACA can investigate and at least report to Parliament the reason why RM2 companies are continuously given contracts? What I hear is that this practice continues unabated under the administration of Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

Beyond good intentions

Having worked closely on the integrity agenda over the last three years, it is my opinion that unless the Executive demonstrates in more concrete ways that action will be taken, the work of the IIM can only remain at the level of good intentions.

The concept of integrity can never be reduced to a good sermon on the subject. It has to become a programme of action to curb corruption and abuse of power. Corruption and abuse of power are both action words; not a concept like integrity.

Therefore the battle for this value of uprightness has to be fought in the trenches where the corruption and abuse take place, not in the well decorated and air-conditioned halls of the IIM. Unless integrity becomes an action word that evokes the inspiration to do the right thing in the right way for the right reasons; we may still be sitting in a hall talking about integrity when 2020 passes and we declare that we are still not a developed nation - and wonder why!

Perak Regent Raja Nazrin Shah in his 7th S suggested that political, social and economic incentives must reward good behaviour and punish bad conduct. He said "it is a fact that many countries are as likely to punish good behaviour as to reward it. After all if there are benefits for corruption, then there is a real cost of being honest."

It is in the public and national interest to punish bad behaviour. Currently, the agency with the primary responsibility appears to be weak and unable to fulfill its role. Tunku Aziz's suggestion merely changes the reporting structure from the prime minister to Parliament. If we can accept Johor Bahru MP Shahrir Abdul Samad's argument that "power resides in the Parliament between general elections", then it follows that the ACA can report to the Parliament. More than 90 percent of the electorate voted in the PM and his government explicitly on the anti-corruption and integrity agenda.

But the real question on everyone's mind as we approach the next general election is whether the PM has lived up to his promise to deliver the integrity agenda? Integrity is the positive and longer term agenda of building a system of trust and confidence in the public culture and values related to corruption, transparency and openness. The reduction of actual corruption and the perception of the existence of corruption is a very negative cost to the whole investment environment in Malaysia.

Currently, it appears that the 'winners' in our society are the corrupt ones and those who abuse authority and power. And as the good Regent of Perak says, "if there are benefits to corruption, there are real costs to being honest".

My question: will honesty or corruption win the hearts and minds of all Malaysians under the current structure of governance?

I think the government must consider the full costs and review the price we are paying for honesty today. Once the majority turns towards the corrupt way of life, we can kiss Vision 2020 goodbye! We need more action and less talk.

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