

# All hands on deck for the war on corruption

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi means business in wiping out graft but he needs more participation at all levels and in all sectors, writes  
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NS - 16/2/2007

THE 2Ms attempted it 25 years ago. Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Tun Musa Hitam launched the *Bersih, Cekap dan Amanah* initiative. They tried their best, but they did not succeed. Though the situation in Malaysia was much better than many countries, corruption continued unabated. Many even think the problem grew worse.

Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi took over the reins and won the general election that followed on a promise to wipe out corruption. Some felt that while it was laudable, the pledge to eradicate corruption was politically unwise.

Corruption was too embedded and endemic to easily root out. The Mahathir administration had failed. The challenges were formidable and there was every likelihood that the Abdullah administration, too, would fail. This would seriously undermine the new prime minister's credibility and dim his political star.

That Abdullah does mean business is shown by the fact that in the last three years, there has been a record increase in the number of arrests made by the Anti-Corruption Agency.

From 339 arrests in 2003, the number rose to 497 in 2004, 485 in 2005 and 433 until last October. The number of convictions has also increased substantially. A highly commendable 75 per cent conviction rate is expected for last year.

Further, the ACA was also beefed up, a National Integrity Institute was established, and a strategy to curb corruption is in place.

The public, however, has remained unconvinced despite the significant progress. Occasional reports of abuse of power and corruption and ineffectual enforcement have contributed to this sentiment.

The 2006 Corruption Perception Index released by Transparency International appeared to reinforce negative perceptions.

Malaysia slipped five ranks in the global survey of 163 countries, from 39 in 2005 to 44 last year, though in terms of



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score there was hardly any difference (from 5.1 to 5.0).

Clearly, the progress achieved on the anti-corruption front did not register on perceptions. Perhaps it was a failure to communicate the positive news. It must be noted, too, that despite the slip in ranking, three-quarters of the world is behind Malaysia.

Abdullah has also embraced other difficult "soft" development issues: Transparency, accountability and more space for the media, besides greater credibility for political institutions. Notwithstanding that there is a compelling need to address all these issues if Malaysia is to become a fully developed country by 2020, the prime minister is further compounding his political risks, for the hardest issues to address are the soft ones.

His administration becomes more vulnerable, because it is exposed to keener scrutiny and subject to higher standards. Governance is much easier in a more closed environment.

This risky course adopted by the prime minister suggests either political courage or political naivete of the highest order. In the case of Abdullah, it cannot be the latter, for he has been through too much.

His courage deserves the full support of everyone: His colleagues in the Cabinet, the political parties in government and the opposition, public in-

terest groups and the person in the street. For leaders like him are few and far between. His failure will be our failure.

The campaign against corruption is one in which we all have a direct and important stake in. It is easily one of the nation's most formidable challenges, for corruption exists, to a greater or lesser extent, in the political structure, bureaucracy and business sector. The ordinary citizen, too, is implicated by virtue of occasionally being the giver.

The government is presently consulting with a wide cross-section of business, public and private stakeholders on how best it can boost the effectiveness of the campaign against corruption. The outcome is eagerly awaited by all, not least the international community.

There are many critical and important things the government with the co-operation and participation of the major stakeholders can do, or do better. The following 20 ideas, some of them not entirely new, are worthy of consideration.

1) The campaign cannot be a one-man mission. The prime minister must receive dedicated support and active participation at all levels and in all sectors.

2) Designate the eradication of corruption as among the highest priorities of the nation.

3) Adopt a no-nonsense, zero-tolerance approach to cor-

ruption eradication. A single-minded purpose should be inculcated at all levels and in all sectors.

4) Set a realistic target, one that pushes the envelope, but is not impossible to accomplish. The present target of a ranking of 30 and score of 6.5 next year cannot be achieved. Hong Kong, an oft-quoted success story, took a little more than 20 years to reach its 2006 ranking of 15 and score of 8.5, and Hong Kong is arguably a smaller and less challenging environment.

Malaysia should aim for a minimum ranking of 20 and score of 8.0 by 2020, when it aspires to be fully developed. The score is more meaningful than the ranking. There should also be pragmatic annual, 2010 and 2015 intermediate targets. An annual increment of two ranks and score of 0.3 is desirable.

5) Supplement the national target with corresponding state and institutional or departmental targets. It cannot be a campaign by the centre alone, with the states neither seen nor heard.

6) Apply key performance indicators at all levels and institutions.

7) Strengthen a culture of integrity and abhorrence for corrupt practices in formal education, training programmes and public sensitisation campaigns.

8) Raise investigation standards through better training and oversight among ACA and police officials as well as deputy public prosecutors.

9) Expedite court hearings of corruption cases.

10) Make government services more transparent and accountable.

11) Replace the Official Secrets Act with a Freedom of Information Act that ensures access to information that is of public interest, but which provides for confidentiality on matters of national strategic and security interest.

12) Reduce layers of bureaucracy and multiple tiers of approval without undermining efficiency and the need for checks and balances.

# Place people of integrity in high-risk positions

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13) Provide more government services online, so that opportunities for corruption are reduced.

Online services should enable tracking of progress and stipulate minimum response times for enquiries.

14) Consider an increase in remuneration for low-wage groups, especially for those working in urban high cost of

living areas (for example through an increase in Cola or other benefits).

15) To reduce the human factor, select and place only men and women of integrity in key high (corruption) risk positions (heads of service; heads of departments; oversight and investigation units; assessment agencies; and payment and collection units). The selection process must provide for this.

16) Implement periodic rotation of officers in corruption-risk departments and positions, except for top key personnel of manifest integrity.

17) Launch a high-impact drive against corruption with highly publicised arrests and disciplinary/legal action.

The ACA has increased manpower and resources for this purpose.

18) Raise the penalty for offences under the Anti-Corruption

Act and departmental regulations.

19) Encourage whistleblowing and provide protection, incentives and non-monetary rewards for whistleblowers.

20) Establish an independent Public Services Complaints Commission by Act of Parliament that is empowered to receive complaints and investigate corruption and misconduct in all branches of the public services as listed in the

Federal Constitution: The public service, judicial and legal service, police and armed forces.

The commission should function as a complement to the ACA and departmental disciplinary bodies.

The exercise to reduce corruption will mutually complement and reinforce the other major initiative to improve delivery of services launched by the Abdullah administration.

Both are sorely needed. They are part of the overall effort to improve governance and competitiveness and position Malaysia on the road to becoming a fully developed country by 2020. They deserve our total support.

■ **Datuk Seri Mohamed Jawhar Hassan is chairman and CEO of Isis Malaysia. The views expressed are his own**