

War against corruption

Accountability is the key

MALAYSIA may have been in a good place if not for corruption. Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim rightly calls Malaysia's corrosive corruption the "main cancer" of the country and people. We have reached such a critical stage that public officials are brazenly claiming to have a right to steal from government coffers just because they have contributed to the nation. How could such dirty hands wash themselves clean like this? Because they can. And they have teeming thousands cheering them on. National service has a whole new meaning now. How did we reach such a low place? The quick answer is we have not been as serious as we should have been about accountability. A blatant example of this was disclosed by the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission's chief graft-buster, Tan Sri Azam Baki, in May last year. The agency had sent over 500 reports on misconduct of public servants, some of them as long as 12 years ago, and yet heads of department failed to respond to the MACC, even after reminders. This simply means that for that many years no action was taken on the misconduct complained of. And what happened to the heads of department who ignored the MACC's reports? Very likely they were let off with just a slap on the wrist. This isn't

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accountability as we know it. Like it or not, the seed of impunity gets planted thus.

Then there is this annual highlight of wastage and leakages that goes on in the public sector by the Auditor General's Report. And this is not about small money. Add it all up, and it reads billions. Who gets caught? Who gets sacked? Your

guess is as good as ours. Accountability escapes public ken because transparency gets buried in the same coffin. Take the case of the RM22 billion annual allocation to eradicate poverty. Some agencies, according to Anwar, had allocated 80 per cent of their funds for management costs. Harsh as it may sound, this is stealth by another name. The poor need the money, not the managers of the fund. Sure, there will be administrative costs, but 80 per cent? How long has this been going on? And why let it happen until the prime minister calls for a reevaluation of the programme? Again, our softly, softly approach to accountability is turning corruption corrosive.

A make-belief — that only a small number in the civil service is corrupt — isn't helping either. If this were so, then there won't be corrupt officers almost everywhere: at the federal, state and local government levels. This is the wrong way of seeing. We would go as far as saying that looking at a problem as corrosive as corruption with such a lens encourages inaction. This is why MACC reports to heads of department go unattended for 12 years. Time to face reality. True, what we see is not what we like. But it is there, ugly though it may be. And what is there is the "main cancer", as the prime minister put it. Anwar's battle cry against the corrosive disease is this: no easing off on the corrupt. The battle cry may remain just that if the civil service doesn't march to his war drum beat.