

Fixing the politics of money

KINIBIZ ONLINE

August 24, 2015

By IDRIS JALA

My last column on regulating political financing placed me in the direct line of ire of readers and politicians. Salvos were shot through social media and bumping into friends would inevitably lead to robust exchanges.

Advocates and the like-minded lent their support, acknowledging the merits of regulation with calls to stop the bickering and politicising of issues. Clearly, Malaysians want to see the establishment of an accountable and transparent system that will bring to end the scourge of grand corruption. Steeped in the current climate of distrust, some also acknowledged – with palpable relief – the surge of voices airing concrete ideas on governance in political funding.

A prime example is Ambiga Sreenevasan, former Bar Council president and civil rights advocate, who tweeted: “Good article by @IdrisJala_ on reg. of political funding. Also need guidelines on conflict of interest which some leaders just don’t get.”

The barrage of criticisms, however, were more colourful! There were calls to “do your job and stay out of politics” and questions around whether I “seriously believe this is political donation”.

Having sifted through these comments, I would like to address three recurring criticisms:

1. “Why are you getting involved in politics? Stick to economics.”

I want to remind everyone, under the National Transformation Programme led by Pemandu, we first launched the Government Transformation Programme (GTP) in January 2010. The seven priority areas include the Anti-Corruption National Key Result Area (NKRA). Through consultation with subject-matter experts and the general public including opposition leaders, a framework was developed in 2009 to structure political financing in a clear, transparent and an accountable manner.

I have been emphatic about the need to institute a more transparent political financing system as it falls squarely under the ambit of grand corruption, an area the NKRA has vehemently sought to address.

Although introduced six years ago, it remains an objective and a very familiar challenge even today. KPIs must be met and I am not steering the ship away from my original coordinates.

2. “Your article ignores the elephant in the room – the RM2.6 billion donation.”

If we had implemented our proposal as presented in 2010, we would not be grappling with issues percolating around the RM2.6 billion political donation. Whatever monies received by whichever party would have been receipted, audited and properly declared.

The Malaysia Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) in a statement issued on Aug 5 clarified that “the RM2.6 billion in the prime minister’s account is a donation contributed by certain parties”.

Say what you want but the black and white of it is as straightforward as this – political donations continue to stream into parties and individuals across the divide. Without regulations, funding as practiced today resides in a very grey area and sits uncomfortably with civil society.

To avoid tumbling down the slippery slope, consequently raising doubts and seeding distrust, there must be reforms that lead to greater transparency. As long as this opaque system pervades, it will always leave room for endless speculations.

3. “How can you blame Pakatan Rakyat for the current situation?”

To clear the air, my intention was never to assign blame but to create impetus for what must happen. The point I wanted to drive home was that the implementation of reforms should not be based on requisites. It merely has to be done!

The reality is that since 2010, not a single party has taken up our proposal. Five long years have passed since the clarion call for reform was sounded. Minister of Governance and Integrity in the Prime Minister’s Department Paul Low and his team have been campaigning for it, and yet no one from both sides took the lead, reducing the urgency for reform to mere contingencies and blame games.

The recent announcement by the prime minister on the setting up of the National Consultative Committee on Political Funding (JKNMPP) is an encouraging development. The Committee will be chaired by Low and with me as his deputy.

I propose for the committee to possibly comprise government agencies and oversight committees, such as the Elections Commission, Registrar of Societies, MACC, Institute of Integrity Malaysia and Legal Affairs Division (PMO), and civil society such as Transparency International-Malaysia, Bar Council, IDEAS and youth groups.

There should be a representative from all political parties, including BN and the opposition. This committee will play a big role in providing what is currently needed – a regulation on political financing to ensure accountability and transparency in all political practice.

I am often disheartened to see the rallying call for transparency and accountability tarred, misrepresented and politicised, with the sole objective of dividing society for political mileage.

Stop the laying of conditions and staging roadblocks to stunt the process for change. Instead let us work together to institute the right framework for political reform to hold politicians and their parties accountable.

Now that the prime minister has made a public announcement over the intent, it is our responsibility to collectively push for the right recommendations on the transformation of political financing to the new committee.

In an ideal setting, parties should voluntarily practice regulation for political funding. Any party just has to come forward and commit to follow these three rules:

- Political donations must be transferred to the account of the political party.
- All transactions must be receipted.
- Accounts must be audited and information on the donation be made accessible to public.

However, if it is done on a voluntary basis, what are the consequences should unethical actions arise? The public demands the security of knowing there are hard rules and enforcement in political financing.

My answer: a bill should be passed in Parliament to ensure rules are strictly adhered to. Those who contravene the process will be penalised by law for non-compliance.

We are at a crossroads and we can choose to straighten our moral compass. Civil society expects greater accountability from their leaders, and it starts first with fixing the politics of funding.

I believe political parties are able to gain greater political capital from this move. The path ahead is clear so my call is simple – just do it.

Idris Jala is CEO of Pemandu, the Performance Management and Delivery Unit, and Minister in the Prime Minister's Department. Fair and reasonable comments are most welcome at idrisjala@pemandu.gov.my.

© 2015 KINIBIZ. All rights reserved.

Source: <http://www.kinibiz.com/story/opinions/185474/fixing-the-politics-of-money.html>