

The Pandora Papers – why is the government so passive?

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Letter to the Editor

From Chandra Muzaffar

It is disappointing that the Malaysian government has chosen to adopt a passive approach to the Pandora Papers. Leaving it to the police to investigate may suggest that the government is not prepared to assume leadership in setting the moral tone for society, especially since some of the underlying ethical concerns in the Pandora Papers may have serious implications for society as a whole.

The Pandora Papers refer to the millions of leaked documents put together by an international consortium of investigative journalists and made public on Oct 2, that allegedly reveal offshore accounts of present and past leaders, including presidents, prime ministers, billionaires and prominent business people.

Former British prime minister Tony Blair and the current Kenyan President, Uhuru Kenyatta, are on the list. It is now public knowledge that finance minister Tengku Zafrul Aziz and one of his predecessors, Daim Zainuddin, are also named.

The inclusion of their names in the Pandora Papers, why they as public figures chose offshore accounts for their assets, and how this impacts upon the local economy are matters which should be investigated.

At the very least, it would help to clear their names. It is in this spirit that a number of governments, such as the Pakistani administration, have chosen to investigate allegations against their people.

In investigating the allegations, the authorities and the public will have to seriously examine both the legal and ethical dimensions.

Beyond the rules pertaining to offshore accounts and the like, there is the more powerful issue of how offshore accounts of important and wealthy personalities drain the economies of many countries.

A 2016 report by Oxfam International estimated that a third of the wealth of rich Africans – about US\$500 billion – was kept in offshore accounts. This resulted in a huge loss in tax revenue, about US\$1.4 billion a year.

For the people, this would have been enough to pay for the healthcare of millions of poor. A global network of tax havens enables the very rich to hide US\$7.6 trillion.

This is why it is imperative for the government to send a firm message to the nation that it will not tolerate the use of offshore accounts.

It must be part of the overall endeavour to eradicate corruption. Private gain should never take precedence over the public good.

Parliament should immediately establish a small committee, of say three persons, to investigate thoroughly the Malaysians named in the Pandora Papers with the focus upon the public office holders.

The committee should be independent, credible and committed, and its report should be submitted directly to the Dewan Rakyat for scrutiny within two months of its appointment.

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