



by Charles Raj

IT IS a setback for Malaysia to have slipped further down the Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index for 2004.

Many had expected an improvement in our position following Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's resolve to fight corruption. But instead, we now share the 39th spot with Tunisia, down from last year's 37th placing.

But, Transparency International's Malaysian President Tunku Abdul Aziz Tunku Ibrahim says that while the drop should not be a matter of grave concern, there still seems to be a perception that we are not serious about curbing corruption.

He was brutally frank in his assessment. 'No one believes we are serious about tackling corruption because the agencies set up are seen as utterly ineffectual, working with inadequate resources and enjoying little or no independence,' he declared.

Whether we agree with Tunku Abdul Aziz's assessment or not, the fact remains that public perception is important as we fight corruption.

While it cannot be denied that Abdullah has stepped up the Government's fight against corruption soon after taking office a year ago, most Malaysians are asking how effective those efforts have been.

For example, is it now easier and quicker to deal with or obtain approvals from government departments? Has the Anti-Corruption Agency more clout and independence? Have large government tenders been advertised as promised? Are inept civil servants and politicians being given the sack?

If people feel that in the last one year little of this has happened, then the Government has to show it means business. Yes, there is no quick fix. Abdullah has said the fight against corruption is a long-drawn process of which the results might not be seen overnight.

It cannot be denied that there have been some commendable progress and initiatives the past year such as charging high-profile personalities for corruption. We have also

A Question of Perception

Despite the rhetoric to curb corruption, Malaysia is still regarded as lax in this area internationally. Why?

seen the setting up of the Malaysian Institute of Integrity and the Royal Commission on the Police Force and the opening of the ACA Academy next year.

But, in the meantime, how are we to change the perception? Politicians and top civil servants can begin by *turun padang* (going to the ground) to solve the *rakyat's* (people's) problems. For instance, it is amazing how complaints appearing in daily mainstream newspapers are simply ignored by most government departments.

The biggest culprits seem to be the local councils and city halls. Could this have something to do with the fact that they are helmed mainly by politicians and not civil servants?

Perhaps the lower-level civil servants do not read newspapers diligently. But surely the heads of departments or more senior officers should be made accountable to address these complaints, especially if they question their integrity. The allegations of money politics during the recent Umno election do not help either.

It's perplexing why inept employees in the public sector are seldom replaced, demoted or made to compensate for their misdeeds. In fact, some even resort to politicising the issue to get away.

After 46 years of independence, the time has come for us to go beyond race, religion or politics when addressing the issue of corruption or incompetence.

The *rakyat* is not as daft or gullible as some politicians and civil servants believe them to

be. As the nation progresses, the levels of education, social consciousness and expectations of accountability and transparency increase.

Public servants would do well to take a leaf from the experiences of the private sector. These days, minority shareholders do not hesitate to boot out errant company directors. The Securities Commission also comes down hard on white-collar criminals.

Another area of serious concern is the yearly *Auditor-General's Report*. Every year, numerous government departments, agencies and ministries are taken to task for the dereliction of duty or sheer incompetence.

Shockingly, in many instances, nothing is done. The A-G even laments that problems highlighted the previous year are not even rectified.

Why are questionable transactions not investigated and the culprits brought to book? Perhaps the Ministers, Menteri Besar and Heads of Department concerned should be made accountable?

As Tunku Abdul Aziz suggests, a review must be carried out to strengthen all government institutions. They must also operate in a totally accountable way.

Perception is often as important as reality. We must not forget that foreign investors often seek opportunities in countries where the cost of doing business is low.

Corruption only increases the cost of doing business. Do we really need this unnecessary disadvantage? **mb**