



A Question of Integrity

From wielding the big stick on corrupt politicians to deviant sect leaders to immoral youths, it would seem that integrity is on the wane these days. This shouldn't be the case, especially when it has been made a cornerstone of government policy.

SO, THAT'S it.

If you were a winner in last year's Umno election and had bribed your way to victory, you can now let out a big sigh of relief.

You have gotten off the hook. That is if newspaper reports quoting your party president and deputy president are correct.

I say 'if' because lately, too many media reports are becoming far too confusing for simple-minded readers – the present company included – to comprehend.

Take the Proton controversy for example. On July 1, a major Malay newspaper headlined: *Mahaleel diarah tunjuk sebab* (Mahaleel ordered to show cause). It quoted sources. Most other newspapers also carried a similar report.

The following day, the same newspaper quoted the Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, as saying that there was no such thing.

It appears that in this particular case, the newspapers gave greater attention to claims by unspecified sources than to the clarification by the Prime Minister.

I would not dare join others in accusing the media of promoting their own agenda. But in the case involving Proton and the issuance of approved permits (APs) for the importation of cars, and some months ago over the sale of DRB-Hicom shares, there appears to be a tendency among some newspapers to take sides.

Back to you, the lucky men and women of Umno. You ought to be thanking your lucky stars. You may want to hold a *kenduri kesyukuran* (thanksgiving feast) or better still, perform an *umrah* (visit to Mecca).

I take it that you have read newspaper reports quoting both Abdullah and Datuk Seri Mohamad Najib Abdul Razak as saying that the party would stick to the last April 18 deadline for making reports on money politics and other irregularities at last year's party election. I deliberately choose not to refer to you as 'leader' because I believe that a corrupt and abusive person should not be a leader. The

fact that you get to hang on to your party and government jobs because there is a deadline in the fight against money politics in *our party* does not mean that you are entitled to be called a leader.

My simple mind tells me that the fight against corruption, of which money politics and the abuse of power are components, is a continuous process and does not have to be based on reports or complaints.

Alas, my simple mind is playing tricks on me! Perhaps, due to years of consuming *kas-kas* (poppy seeds) in my *nasi kandar*. I spoke too soon when, in my last column, I said the tough action against Tan Sri Mohd Isa Abdul Samad looked like the beginning of a clean-up in Umno.

So, my notion that it takes two to tango does not, at least for the time being, seem to apply to Umno. Was Isa really tangoing alone?

Now I am beginning to sympathise with him. A man who dances the tango alone and gets into trouble has to be a terribly bad dancer or just plain unlucky. Or could it be that we do not understand tango enough?

My simple mind also tells me that an investigation by the disciplinary board is not intended solely to find a defendant guilty. Equally important is to clear the names of those who are not guilty but are under suspicion.

Keeping Umno clean is not about punishing the wrongdoers alone. It is also about protecting the reputation of the law-abiding ones. As it stands today, many of last year's winners are under a cloud of suspicion.

Much misunderstood

THE Government has made integrity another cornerstone of its policy. But it appears that, like many other recent policies and initiatives, it is yet to be fully understood and embraced by the masses.

Even among the policy makers and implementers, the understanding may still be rudimentary. While the media has tried to be helpful, it too is limited by its understanding of these policies and initiatives.

The adoption of the integrity initiative was prompted by the results of a survey carried out among undergraduates of local universities in 2002. It found that 31% of them said they were willing to accept bribes if they had the power and the opportunity.

But integrity goes beyond not accepting or giving bribes, which appears to be the general understanding at this point of time.

Integrity is generally defined as a steadfast adherence to a strict moral or ethical code, the state of being unimpaired (soundness) and the quality or condition of being whole or undivided (completeness).

Etymologically, it is from the Middle English *integrite*, from Old French, from Latin *integritas*, from *integer*.

Thus, many things that have been said and done lately have lacked integrity in the sense that they are not sufficiently sound, honest and complete.

Take, for instance, a recent statement by a Cabinet minister who asserted that *Harga minyak tinggi bebankan kerajaan* (High oil prices burden the government).

The minister was more concerned about the effects higher oil prices had on the government rather than on the people. At a time when the *rakyat* is being increasingly burdened by rising inflation, which according to Bank Negara Malaysia, had risen to 3.1% in May – the highest in six years – it is entirely insensitive for the minister to be talking about the government's burden.

If my rudimentary understanding of politics is correct, then the burden of the government is to lessen or remove completely the burden of the people.

In the case of the recent petroleum products price increases, ministers and top civil servants are the people who are least burdened. They enjoy all kinds of perks and exemptions that make them largely impervious to inflation.

The truth is, the government collects more tax revenue from the higher petrol and diesel prices. And being a net exporter of oil, the country gains substantially from the higher oil prices.

Take the national petroleum company, Petronas, for instance. Thanks to the higher oil prices and good management, it made a record net profit of RM35.5 billion in 2004. It paid the government RM31.2 billion in tax, dividends, export duties and royalties.

So, how can anyone tell us that the government does not have money and that the high petroleum price is a burden?

Granted that subsidy is unsustainable and it distorts the economy, passing the cost of oil price increases to the people without careful consideration and back-up plans could lead to incalculable socio-economic and political repercussions.

If there were an alternative to subsidies other than impoverishing the people, then those free enterprise economies in America and Europe would have done away with it a long time ago. Instead, they are the biggest subsidy providers in the world. They even subsidise their airplane makers.

Even poorer Indonesia is subsidising fuel prices to keep them below global levels. Its Energy and Mineral Resources Minister Purnomo Yusgiantoro was quoted as saying that fuel subsidy might double to US\$ 15.3 billion this year.

Then, there is another minister who told tsunami-affected fishermen to confront district officers if they had not yet received help, saying that money collected for the purpose had all been disbursed.

If he cared, he would be the one asking the district officers. Surely, he knows the goings-on at district offices and other government departments. All he needs to do is refer to the deluge of complaints against government departments and officers published daily by the newspapers.

Doing things credibly

THERE are many other examples of the lack of integrity among public servants, private sector officials and law enforcement agencies.

Take, for instance, the raid on the so-called *Kerajaan Langit* (Empire of the Sky) sect on July 2. The Terengganu *Fatwa* Committee declared the sect deviant some time ago.

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Despite deploying, according to newspaper reports, 70 policemen and Religious Affairs Department officials, the raiders failed to arrest the sect leader, Ariffin Mohamad – endearingly called *Ayah Pin* (Father Pin) by his followers.

Yet, two days later, *The Star* newspaper found him sitting cross-legged at a coffee shop in the sect's commune. Since then, he has been gracing newspaper pages regularly with stories of his exploits.

It is bungling acts like these that make an otherwise mildly troublesome figure like Ariffin a hero. Soon, if not already, somebody will make up stories saying he possesses supernatural powers that make him invisible to the authorities.

Such a claim is almost certain to attract the attention of the star-struck *Akademi Fantasia* crowd, the gullible *skim cepat kaya* (get-rich-quick scheme) participants and believers of the *batu azimat* (miracle stone).

Then, there was the bungled attempt by institutional shareholders of PSC Industries Bhd to oust Tan Sri Amin Shah Omar Shah. They failed because they did not appoint the right proxies and sent the wrong proxy forms.

That Amin is not endearing himself to his institutional investors is none of our business. Our concern is the interest of the various trust agencies, which are shareholders of the company.

So, while we talk about integrity, let us make sure that whatever we do withstands the integrity test. We do not appoint a gravedigger to become an oil prospector although both jobs involve digging.

Going beyond the literal

THE lack of integrity is further compounded by the absence of finesse, sensitivity and dignity in some of the actions taken by the authorities.

This, in turn, threatens to make a mockery of the policies and initiatives of the government.

For instance, how can we call ourselves *masyarakat penyayang* (caring society) when moral policemen and an assortment of other so-called moral guardians are more keen to wield the big stick and shame people rather than teaching and advising them?

Yet, we see these state instruments employing some of the most uncivilised methods and tactics against young people caught for allegedly transgressing the moral and religious code.

If these people and agencies are truly Islamic and are upholding the *hadhari* principle, then they should use compassion, persuasion and good examples to stop the so-called moral and religious offences.

In the wider context, there is the danger of these policies and initiatives being hijacked by zealots and political interest groups.

Take, for example, the *penerapan nilai-nilai Islam* (the inculcation of Islamic values) initiative of the Mahathir-Anwar Era. Whereas the idea was to inculcate Islamic values, which are universal values anyway, into the administration in order to make it more moral-based and, therefore, free from abuse and corruption, the opposite happened.

After a while, it was reduced to debates and disputes over dress codes - mainly for female office workers and

students - the physical separation of men and women in public places and the growing of facial hair by Muslim men.

In the universities, soon after the initiative was launched, it was promptly hijacked by Pas to promote its political interest.

We are already hearing the zealots telling young people that they are merely implementing the *hadhari* programme when they confront or arrest young Muslim men and women for infringing the dress code or for consuming alcoholic drinks.

As the case was with the inculcation of Islamic values, Pas is quick to take advantage of the *hadhari* programme to malign the government.

A Pas poster seen in a coffee shop in Parit Buntar, Perak recently read: *Datanglah beramai-ramai menonton rakaman video Islam Hadhari Terengganu memusnahkan rumah rakyat* (Come watch a video tape recording of the Terengganu Hadhari Islam destroying people's houses).

Islam is Islam. What may be different is the Muslim society. The Muslim society in Malaysia may be different from those in other Muslim countries. But Islam is the same.


So, we can brand our Muslim society by whatever name we think is appropriate. So maybe *hadhari* is appropriate to describe Muslim society in Malaysia or, for that matter, the whole country.

But as for Islam, there is only one - the Islam of God and Prophet Muhammad. It is beyond branding.

Then, there was the threat by the Inland Revenue Board (IRB) to camp in front of houses of income tax dodgers. Although the government needs money and the board is saddled with poor collection of income tax, camping in front of taxpayers' houses is going a bit overboard.

Furthermore, not every taxpayer who fails to pay his taxes on time is a dodger. The IRB must examine its own system before wielding the big stick.

I have done my duty as a voter and taxpayer. I hope the relevant minister joins me at the coffee-shops sometimes to see for herself the beggars and an assortment of other destitute people now swarming the streets of Kuala Lumpur.

What has happened to our *Jabatan Kebajikan Masyarakat* (Social Welfare Department), may I ask? I thought that when I paid my taxes and other dues, I could sit back and enjoy my *teh tarik* without being bothered by vagrants. Alas, I was wrong. 

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Besides *Malaysian Business*, Kadir also contributes to local
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