



The Importance of Being 'Clean'

That Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi has made integrity the cornerstone of his government is highly laudable. But from lax implementation of policies and laws to blatant abuse of power by government officials, it would seem that he is surrounded by people who have no qualms about sabotaging his crusade and bringing him disrepute. So are they working with him or are they serving their own interest?

AS MANY businesses are reeling under a labour shortage – hopefully temporarily – as a result of the nationwide operations against illegal immigrants, there appears to be a need for greater clarity and consistency in the overall labour policy.

Despite a healthy population growth, averaging 2.6% annually, our economic expansion continues to outpace labour supply. This is a rare and commendable achievement.

Although the labour market is not as robust as it used to be, with unemployment averaging 3.5%, we are likely to continue to need immigrant workers for many years to come.

Historically too, this country had always allowed the employment of foreign workers, many of whom settled down and became citizens of independent Malaya in 1957.

Immigration and the granting of citizenship to immigrants is a continuing process. There is no reason why they should be discontinued simply because the inflow of foreign workers in recent years has gone out of control.

It has gone haywire because we have failed to implement a clear and consistent policy. This has been made worse by poor implementation of immigration and employment laws that in turn has created opportunities for a whole range of abuse by civil servants, in particular law enforcement officers, employers and not least the immigrants.

Then there is the introduction, or, in some cases, the reintroduction of communicable diseases. Malaria and tuberculosis were almost eradicated until they were reintroduced and spread by foreign workers from poorer countries.

The choosiness of our own people is necessitating the employment of these workers. Tens of thousands of our school leavers and university graduates are, at one point

or another, unemployed by choice. They do not accept jobs that do not meet their expectations, are not to their liking or are not in the location of their choice. But there is a more ominous aspect to it too.

Brain gain

WHILE the majority of new jobs are being created in the private sector, many graduates have been marginalised either because their areas of specialisation do not carry much value in the market-driven environment or because they themselves do not have the confidence to work in an environment other than the government.

Language is a barrier. As businesses become more globalised and internationalised, English becomes a necessity rather than a mere plus point.

Estimates put the number of unemployed graduates at around 80,000 – an alarmingly high figure.

Foreign workers have contributed to the growth of our economy. What we now need is a clear and more consistent policy. The practice of prematurely terminating or restricting the employment period of foreign workers is not necessarily the best practice. It takes time and money to train a worker, both local and foreign. Terminating or restricting their duration of employment will impact on their productivity, which is the productivity of our own economy.

If they are found to be good at what they do and are law-abiding, then they should even be considered for long-term employment and permanent residency. This has become a global trend where free-flow of capital is being accompanied by cross-border labour mobility.

To continue to be competitive in the global market-place and attract foreign direct investment (FDI), Malaysia must be willing to adopt an open and transparent immigrant labour policy.

Our loss could be other people's gain. Workers trained

in our country could one day – if not already – become our competitors when they are employed in their own countries and elsewhere.

Thus, we must endeavour to employ not just domestic helpers, commercial, industrial and construction workers but also foreigners with technical, technological and managerial skills so that the productivity of our economy is kept at the highest possible level.

It is recalled that in the early days of national development in the 1960s, Malaysia imported a large number of doctors and dentists from such countries as Indonesia, Myanmar and Egypt. Many went on to settle in this country and become pioneers in local universities and medical colleges.

TIME TO FIND ANSWERS, NOT EXCUSES

PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's assertion that the honeymoon between his government and the people is over could not have come a minute too soon.

In fact, many concerned Malaysians feel that the honeymoon was over a long time ago. One university lecturer argued that the first 100 days are often understood to be the honeymoon period. This government has been in power for more than a year.

One may venture to ask: Why 100 days? It may, in part, have to do with the media practice of using the 100th day as an appropriate time to interview a first-time Prime Minister for their centre spreads.

In practice, there is neither a honeymoon nor a grace period for any government. The business of serving the people begins immediately and never ends.

Interestingly, Abdullah's reminder to the congregating Barisan Nasional (BN) Members of Parliament in Kuching on March 5 coincided with a number of high-profile controversies surrounding several key BN members. These incidents, even if they are only partially true, do not speak well of BN elected representatives, especially those holding the posts of Menteri Besar, Chief Ministers and state executive councillors.

The incidents reflect their lack of respect for the people and disregard for transparency and accountability. The people implicated appear to be of the mindset that the people are naive or they just don't care.

In the cases of the aborted Selangor Public Accounts Committee's 'Belly Dancing' tour of Egypt, the Melaka State Government's expensive visit to Dubai and the United States and the Bukit Cahaya Seri Alam environmental rape, not only were the people kept in the dark, but the Prime Minister was also caught by surprise.

What followed was mind-boggling. When ordered by the Prime Minister to carry out a thorough investigation,

the Selangor Government, led by the Menteri Besar, Datuk Seri Dr Mohamad Khir Toyo, told the Press that *semuanya ok, tidak terjejas dan tidak diceroboh* (All's okay, not affected and not transgressed).

He was almost mocking the public by referring to the Agricultural Park when the complaints were about the indiscriminate hill cutting and land clearing around the park.

Abdullah has made integrity the cornerstone of his government. He has launched the National Integrity Plan and commissioned the Integrity Institute of Malaysia. But for him to fulfill these and other aspirations, the people making up his government and administration must also be made up of men and women of integrity. They must also be right for the job.

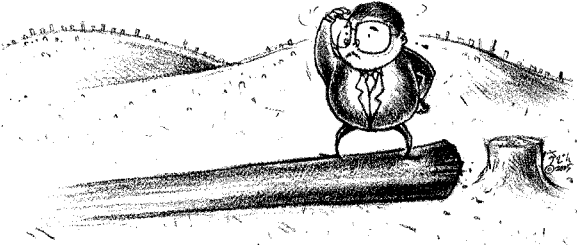
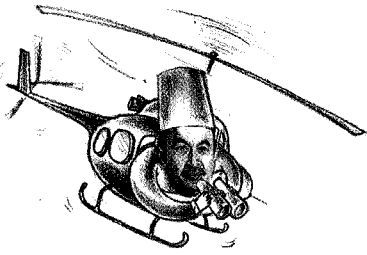
Moment of truth

LUCKILY, the Prime Minister had a good mind to swiftly reject his explanation. Not wanting to be further misled, Abdullah made an aerial tour of the area and publicly declared that he was deeply disappointed.

And there was no better occasion for Abdullah to make his stand known than when launching the National Landscape Day in Kuala Lumpur on March 3. Proving his seriousness about wanting his instruction to be carried out fully, Abdullah told the Press in Seremban on March 4 that he would personally monitor Mohamad Khir's actions. He said he would like to see to what degree the Selangor Menteri Besar would be able to handle the matter.

It is dereliction of duty for BN elected representatives and civil servants to keep information from their superiors and interfere with the smooth flow of information.

At the end of the day, it is the top guy – the Prime



Minister — who has to take the blame and suffer the consequences.

Abdullah might have led the BN to a landslide victory in last year's general election and with it elevated many people to the position of power, but he alone cannot fulfill promises made to the people.

He needs his Cabinet Ministers, Menteri Besar and Chief Ministers, Chief Secretary to the Government and heads of government-linked companies and corporations. If they fail, we cannot expect him to succeed. He needs to be told and informed. Above all, he needs to be told the truth.

Days after taking the helm, the Prime Minister made some very well-minted statements that, as the election results showed, went down favourably with the people. He reached out to them with simple yet meaningful slogans like 'work with me and not for me' and 'tell me what I have to know and not what pleases me'.

If the shoe fits ...

UNFORTUNATELY, it would appear that there are those in the government, the civil service and Umno who think they can exploit this 'Mr Nice' and get away with murder.

This scribe had written soon after Abdullah became Prime Minister that he should not be too taken up by the 'Mr Nice' tag, saying that some unscrupulous people might take advantage of his friendly nature.

There are doubts that some people, including those in the political power structure, are mistaking Abdullah's friendly demeanour and simple ways as signs of weakness. The final outcome of these and other well-publicised cases will directly impact on Abdullah's reputation as 'Mr Clean'

and his crusade against the abuse of power and corruption.

For instance, we must know for certain that the Melaka Chief Minister Datuk Seri Mohd Ali Rustam paid from his own pocket the cost incurred by his children when they accompanied him to Dubai and the US, and that the Selangor PAC members have made good whatever costs incurred by the state in relation to the aborted trip.

The government must not only be carrying out its promises and upholding its many slogans but must also be seen to be doing so, failing which its integrity would be questioned.

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In layman's terms, a *Jabatan Kerja Raya* mandore is good for supervising a work gang but not building the Penang Bridge. A driver of a *lori hantu* (ghost lorry) may be made to drive a road grader but not an executive coach. A well-digger cannot be made a drilling-rig operator and a newspaper stringer cannot be appointed editor. Similarly, it is not a clever decision to make a teenaged apprentice a mandore.

We may have the power and the audacity to assign them the tasks, but neither our decisions nor the fruits of their labour can withstand the test of integrity.


LEARNING FROM NATURE

IT was never the practice among hound owners to let the pups loose among a hunting pack.

I was watching a *National Geographic* programme on Arabian hounds the other day. Fascinating animals. Their images even graced the tombs of the pharaohs and were the subject of songs and poems.

The Arabs taught their hound pups to hunt small animals like desert rats and lizards. They were not allowed to join the adults in a hunt until they were old enough. If they got in the way of a hunting pack, they could get injured, derail the hunt or even hurt the adult animals. In the wild, an injured animal is as good as dead.

There is so much nature can teach us. Unlike humans, animals are driven by instinct. For example, a lion cub will instinctively lie low and clear of a hunting pride.

Instinct tells them that if the hunt fails or if their mothers are injured in the commotion, they would go hungry or may even die of starvation. 

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