

MAKING MALAYSIA CORRUPTION FREE

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The 2Ms attempted it 25 years ago. They launched the *Bersih, Cekap dan Amanah* initiative. They tried their best, but they did not succeed. Though the situation in Malaysia was much better than in most of the rest of the world, corruption continued unabated. Many even think that the problem grew worse.

Abdullah Badawi took over the reins and won the general elections that followed on a promise to wipe out corruption. Some felt that while it was laudable, the solemn pledge to eradicate corruption was politically unwise. Corruption was too embedded and endemic to easily root out. The Mahathir administration had failed. The challenges were formidable, and there was every likelihood that the Abdullah administration too would fail. This would seriously undermine the new Prime Minister's credibility, and dim his political star.

Progress

That Abdullah does mean business is shown by the fact that in the last three years there has been a record increase in the number of arrests made by the Anti Corruption Agency. From a total of 339 arrests in 2003, the number mounted to 497 in 2004, 485 in 2005 and 433 until October last year. The number of successful convictions has also increased substantially. A highly commendable 75 percent conviction rate is expected for 2006.

Further, the ACA was also beefed up, a National Integrity Institute was established, and a clear strategy to curb corruption is in place.

Scepticism

The public however has remained generally unconvinced despite this significant progress. Occasional reports of abuse of power and corruption and ineffectual enforcement have contributed to this sentiment. The 2006 Corruption Perception Index

released by Transparency International appeared to reinforce negative perceptions. Malaysia slipped five ranks in the global survey of 163 countries, from 39 in 2005 to 44 in 2006, though in terms of score there was hardly any difference (from 5.1 to 5.0). Clearly, the progress achieved on the anti-corruption front did not register on perceptions. Perhaps it was a failure to effectively communicate the positive news. It must be noted too that despite the slip in ranking, three-quarters of the world is still behind Malaysia.

Political risk and courage

Pak Lah has also embraced other difficult “soft” development issues – transparency, accountability and more space for the media, besides greater credibility for political institutions. Notwithstanding that there is a compelling need to address all these issues if Malaysia is to become a fully developed country by 2020, the Prime Minister is further compounding his political risks, for the hardest issues to address are the soft issues. His administration becomes more vulnerable, because it is exposed to keener scrutiny and subject to higher standards. Governance is much easier in a more closed environment.

This risky course adopted by the Prime Minister suggests either political courage or political naiveté of the highest order. In the case of Abdullah it cannot be the latter, for he has been through too much. His courage deserves the full support of everyone – his colleagues in the cabinet, the political parties both in government and the opposition, public interest groups and the person in the street. For leaders like him are few and far between. His failure will be our failure.

A campaign by all

The campaign against corruption is one in which we all have a direct and important stake. It is easily one of the nation’s most formidable challenges, for corruption exists, to a greater or lesser extent, in the political structure, the bureaucracy and the business sector. The ordinary citizen too is implicated, by virtue of occasionally being the giver.

The government is presently consulting with a wide cross-section of business, public and private stakeholders on how best it can substantially enhance the effectiveness of the

campaign against corruption. The outcome is eagerly awaited by all, not least the international community.

20 ideas

There are many critical and important things the government with the cooperation and participation of the major stakeholders can do, or do better. The following 20 ideas, some of them not entirely new, are perhaps worthy of consideration.

- The campaign cannot be a one-man mission. The Prime Minister must receive dedicated support and active participation at all levels and in all sectors.
- Designate the eradication of corruption as among the highest priorities of the nation.
- Adopt a no-nonsense, zero-tolerance approach to corruption eradication. A single-minded purpose should be inculcated at all levels and in all sectors.
- Set a realistic target, one that pushes the envelope, but is not impossible to accomplish. The present target of a ranking of 30 and score of 6.5 in 2008 cannot be achieved. Hong Kong, an oft-quoted success story, took a little more than 20 years to reach its 2006 ranking of 15 and score of 8.5, and Hong Kong is arguably a smaller and less challenging environment. Malaysia should aim for a minimum ranking of 20 and score of 8.0 by 2020, when it aspires to be fully developed. The score is more meaningful than the ranking. There should also be appropriate pragmatic annual, 2010 and 2015 intermediate targets. An annual increment of 2 ranks and score of 0.3 is perhaps desirable.
- Supplement the national target with corresponding state and institutional or departmental targets. It cannot be campaign by the centre alone, with the states neither seen nor heard.
- Apply key performance indicators at all levels and institutions.
- Strengthen a culture of integrity and abhorrence for corrupt practices in formal education, training programmes and public sensitisation campaigns.
- Raise investigation standards through better training and oversight among ACA and police officials as well as DPPs.

- Expedite court hearings of corruption cases.
- Make government services generally more transparent and accountable.
- Replace the Official Secrets Act with a Freedom of Information Act that ensures access to information that is of public interest, but which nevertheless provides for confidentiality on matters of national strategic and security interest.
- Reduce layers of bureaucracy and multiple tiers of approval without undermining efficiency and need for minimum check and balance.
- Provide more government services on-line, so that opportunities for corruption are reduced. On-line services should enable tracking of progress and stipulate minimum response times for enquiries.
- Consider increase in remuneration for low-wage groups especially for those working in urban high cost of living areas (for example through an increase in COLA or other benefits).
- To reduce the human factor, select and emplace only men and women of integrity for key high (corruption) risk positions (heads of service; heads of departments; oversight and investigation units; assessment agencies; and payment and collection units). The selection process must provide for this.
- Implement periodic rotation of officers in corruption-risk departments and positions, except for top key personnel of manifest integrity.
- Launch a high-impact drive against corruption with highly publicised arrests and disciplinary/legal action. The ACA now has increased manpower and resources for this purpose.
- Raise the penalty for offences under the Anti-Corruption Act and departmental regulations.
- Encourage whistleblowing and provide protection, incentives and non-monetary rewards for whistleblowers.
- Establish an independent Public Services Complaints Commission by Act of Parliament that is empowered to receive complaints and investigate corruption and misconduct in all branches of the public services as listed in the Federal Constitution – the general public service, the judicial and legal service, the police

and armed forces, and others. The Commission should function as a complement to the ACA and departmental disciplinary bodies.

The exercise to reduce corruption will mutually complement and reinforce the other major initiative to improve delivery of services launched by the Abdullah administration. Both are sorely needed. They are part of the overall effort to improve governance and competitiveness, and position Malaysia firmly on the road to becoming a fully developed country by 2020.

They deserve our total support.

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