

Having faith in corruption in Malaysia

Friday 16 October 2020, by [THAYAPARAN S](#) (Date first published: 21 September 2020).

Of late, social media has been awash with news stories of how some people live in this country. Whether it was the story of the student who had to take her exam on top of a tree or residents of a plantation with their improvised modem, the main theme running through all these stories is how the political system has failed them.

Also in the news are the ongoing corruption cases of political personalities and how they solicited bribes amounting to millions, paid bloggers to spruce up their reputations. And generally, how they allegedly used taxpayers' money to live lifestyles that are disgusting when you think of how the B40 group and others have to live in this country.

Corruption is one thing, but I have always said that religious extremism is the existential threat of this country. Here is the thing, though. Corruption and religious extremism are not mutually exclusive in this country.

During the movement control order, I wrote about a friend of mine who was so incensed that the government [could steal so much money](#), but could not provide – at that time – free masks. He had said: “People are more interested in praying than seeing that the religious authorities help the rakyat.”

This is the time when our religious leaders should be handing out face masks and hand sanitisers, and giving people proper information, he said in his stark Terengganu accent.

“We have the money, Pakcik. See, they stole so much so, of course, there is money,” he added. It sounds so simple when my friend puts it that way.

This same friend was livid when he read about all this money from the corruption cases. Again in his stark Terengganu accent, he thundered late one night to a group of us (while I hastily scribbled down his comments) “...what were they doing with all this money? They said it was for charity, but where did it all go?”

The truth be told. I was not exactly sure which news story he was referring to. I know he and his friends were upset when they read about the Veveonah Mosibin story, and they had their own stories with a similar theme about how they had to struggle with their children. They were also extremely upset about the corruption cases they read about, not only in news stories but from forwarded texts, the authenticity of which I could not confirm.

Anecdotally speaking none of them had a problem with needs-based affirmative action, having lived with other “poor non-Malay” Malaysians. They intuitively understood that poverty and lack of opportunity – even with the special rights – was the connective tissue that linked them and the non-Malays in their class in a cycle of hand-to-mouth existence.

All this reminded me of what Dr Jeyakumar Devaraj (above), of Parti Sosialis Malaysia (PSM), said sometime back when he was talking about what was going on in New Malaysia and how Pakatan

Harapan should focus on a needs-based policy if it wanted to gain traction with the majority of this country.

[Jeyakumar said](#):: “If Harapan wanted to cut aid to the people, it should target the rich Malays who benefit from affirmative action meant to uplift the poor. If you stop affirmative action for the rich Malays, even the poor Malays will accept it.”

While I agree with the good doctor, I think it gets further complicated when religion is added to the mix. We have convicted politicians using religion to justify their continued political careers.

The most influential religious party in this country has embraced its former political rival, apparently to stop the Chinese from taking over this country, not to mention it has financial scandals. This ethnoreligious narrative is far more powerful than the counter-narratives of the “opposition”.

Add to this, when Harapan was in power, it did nothing to create an alternative Islamic narrative, with Harapan’s religious czar finding an alleged money launderer and religious zealot, Dr Zakir Naik, inspiring.

While I have many Malay friends who support progressive ideas, I have many more Malay friends who think that hudud is a good idea. This group, for instance, was divided in their attitudes towards hudud and how it would deter corruption. Those in favour of *hudud* (punishments under Islamic law) believe that corruption would be a thing of the past if “corrupt people” had their hands chopped off.

They were silent when asked about the corruption scandals and convictions of prominent political personalities, the looting of religious bodies such as Tabung Haji and the numerous financial scandals where money meant for religious purposes were siphoned off for personal use.

Those not in favour of *hudud* were nevertheless worried of encroaching on the “liberal” mindset that they defined in exactly the same way as the propaganda from the religious bureaucracy. They did not see the dissonance of far-right personalities living a “Western” lifestyle replete with alcoholic excess and pleasures of the flesh, which often leaked into social media. They saw no contradiction in the way how these more often than not Western-educated rabble-rousers used religion but lived a lifestyle which was anathema to what they espoused.

We have influential religious speakers, like Zakir, spreading their propaganda in this country. He was quoted saying that God will take care of Muslim leaders who have sinned in the afterlife, but it is the duty of Muslims – Zakir cites the Quran – to vote for corrupt Muslim leaders over righteous non-Muslims or non-corrupt Muslims in a coalition with non-believers.

Zakir claims that it really does not matter if a non-corrupt Muslim leader provides a better existence because of how long Muslims are living in the world.

This is why we have people voting against their interests. This is why corrupt or even convicted politicians can get away with holding political rallies and still appeal to their base.

When you convince people that God will ultimately determine your fate and that voting for corrupt leaders is a religious duty, you normalise corruption in a way that secular dysfunctionality could never do.

S Thayaparan

[Click here](#) to subscribe to our weekly newsletters in English and or French. You will receive one email every Monday containing links to all articles published in the last 7 days.

P.S.

Malaysiakini

<https://www.malaysiakini.com/columns/543398>