The need for scrutiny on malpractices of political figures

- **Greater** damage is inflicted upon PH if it does not show a genuine commitment to seek the truth and, worse yet, if it shows no desire to take colleagues to task for any wrongdoings
- **If** there is truth to the falsified degrees or of credentials misrepresented, then swift action must be taken, considering the long-term ill-effects of inaction

Marzuki: In the eye of a storm over his education certificate

by **Voon Zhen Yi**

In recent days, several Pakatan Harapan (PH) leaders have been called out for having falsified or questionable academic qualifications.

Whether these accusations are true is simply a matter of comparing their CVs (the version they used before being called out) to the records of the education providers in question.

Although these deplorable acts are not of the "magnitude to what those who rape or steal," in the words of a Bersatu supreme council member, claims against several PH politicians such as deputy foreign minister Datuk Marzuki Yahya's questionable Cambridge credentials, be they from the UK or US, deserve thorough investigation.

The case of questionable credentials coming to light not only raises the issue of upholding basic and universal cultural values of honesty and integrity but also sets the overall message and subsequent effects any action (or indeed non-action) can have towards acts of malpractice.

Reactions from PH have thus far been disappointing. There have been numerous calls from the opposition for Marzuki's resignation but little or no such sentiment resonating from the senator's PH's allies.

When Barisan Nasional (BN) was in power, there were such episodes, too. When politicians or top civil servants were called out, the immediate reaction was one that was aggressively defensive.

In fact, back then, a witch hunt would be for the whistle blowers rather than pursue the allegation.

In the recent events, PH too has been defending its allies by default, regardless of the issue.

Others have gone mute and there has been insufficient demand for the allegations to be looked into.

Such an approach is dangerous not only for the coalition and the individual parties in it but also because of the mindset it risks cultivating.

Phenomenon

This is a phenomenon where wrongdoings, be they accidental or deliberate, seem to get a free pass in Malaysia.

Resignations from prominent and top positions of the public service (and even the private sector) after being caught for wrongdoings is something that does not happen often enough (putting aside politically-linked resignations after the May 2018 general election, which have been plentiful).

Though sackings for less prominent positions have been more consistent, it is the top, symbolic positions of power which have not come under sufficient scrutiny.

For Malaysia to move forward, it must rid itself of this toxic practice.

It is important for the government to not give the perception of immunity for apparent incompetence or malpractice.

Perhaps politically, a knee-jerk reaction would be to deny any wrongdoing so as to preserve a near-perfect image of the elected government, that any admission of guilt is seen as a weakness.

Upon more thorough consideration, there is in fact greater damage inflicted upon the coalition if it does not show a genuine commitment towards seeking the truth and, worse yet, if it shows no desire to take colleagues to task for possible wrongdoings.

As such individuals are public figures, how the party manages its members over allegations of misconduct comes under scrutiny.

Codes of coduct

Political parties should have codes of conduct, with any breach of the code leading to a suspension or expulsion of membership.

For those in public office, this would be accompanied by a demand for the official to resign from his or her position.

If it is merely a loss of face, the government need not fret. Dubious means of obtaining fake degrees leading to the resignations of political figures, though uncommon, has happened in other parts of the world.

In South Africa, prominent MP and anti-apartheid activist Pallo Jordan resigned after having lied about possessing a doctorate on his CV.

In Spain health minister Carmen Monton resigned after the questionable nature of how she received her degree came to light (she was awarded grades without attending classes or contact with professors).

In the business world, there is the infamous case of Scott Thompson, the former CEO of Yahoo! who claimed he had a bachelor's degree in accounting and computer science. While the accounting major was true, the computer science major was pure fiction. Thompson eventually left the company.

Ironically, even in academia, one as prestigious as Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) has fallen victim to falsified credentials when its former dean, Marilee Jones, who was with the institute for 28 years, admitted to fabricating her education credentials.

Quitting is a norm

The point is that all these figures, once exposed, departed from office. The PH government must demand the same should Marzuki and others be found not to have been honest about their credentials.

A public official not accounting for his or her wrongdoing sends a very unfortunate message, that wrongdoers face no consequence.

The absence of consequences in the light of wrongful or misleading action becomes a reward.

This can embolden further malpractice if not kept in check by members of the party or the public and can give way to acts far more disingenuous, such as corruption and other crimes.

Such a result is far more worrying.

On the other hand, resignation over such wrongdoings, be it voluntary or induced, sends a powerful message.

It shows the government's commitment towards being a virtuous one and practising a no-tolerance policy against dishonesty, regardless of seniority.

In several countries, resignations from party leadership often follow dissatisfactory performance during elections.

Party leaders in the UK, US and most developed countries, despite being highly competent, have stepped down to send a message that they take responsibility for shortcomings, even if the factors were outside their control.

These resignations were not even a result of questionable practices. It is a message of the party's commitment to high performance and good governance towards the people, rather than upholding the interest of individuals within the party.

Should the allegations be true, all is not lost for these politicians. Trust, credibility and redemption can return over time once they have sufficiently atoned for their errors.

Such should be the price of politics and public office.

PH at a crossroads

PH is at a crossroads and frankly, the situation is a very straightforward one. If there is truth to the falsified degrees or misrepresentation of credentials, then swift action must be taken, taking into consideration the strategic and long-term ill-effects of inaction.

Hence, PH members should limit the damage this ordeal is causing. They need to show strength in unity, that they can stand up to their erroneous colleagues, defend them by taking them to task, and take appropriate corrective action before the government loses too much credibility.

Loss of political points aside, a tainted credibility also does not bode well with business and foreign diplomacy.

In an era where social media enables the public to scrutinise the government's every move, they can ill-afford to sweep this matter away and must reach a convincing and conclusive result.

An official inquiry committee should be formed comprising all component parties - perhaps even extending an invitation to several members of the opposition to make up the committee - and work towards getting to the bottom of these allegations in a timely fashion.

Once the matter is put to rest, the government can focus on more pressing issues in governing the country and serving its people.

The rakyat deserves better.

FocusM

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