

The Pandora Papers - Why Such Passivity?

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It is disappointing that the Malaysian government has chosen to adopt a passive approach to the Pandora Papers. Leaving it to the police to investigate may suggest that the government is not prepared to assume leadership in setting the moral tone for society especially since some of the underlying ethical concerns in the Pandora Papers may have serious implications for society as a whole.

The Pandora Papers refer to the millions of leaked documents that allegedly reveal offshore accounts of present and past leaders, including presidents, prime ministers, billionaires and prominent business people put together by an international consortium of investigative journalists and made public on the 2nd of October 2021. Former British Prime Minister Tony Blair and the current Kenyan President, Uhuru Kenyatta, are on the list. It is now public knowledge that the Malaysian finance Minister, Tengku Zafrul Abdul Aziz and one of his predecessors, Tun Daim Zainuddin are also named.

The inclusion of their names in the Pandora Papers, why they as public figures chose offshore accounts for their assets, and how this impacted upon the local economy are matters which should be investigated. At the very least it would help to clear their names. It is in this spirit that a number of governments, like the Pakistani government, have chosen to investigate allegations in the Papers against their people.

In investigating the allegations, the authorities and the public will have to examine seriously both the legal and ethical dimensions. Beyond the rules pertaining to off-shore accounts and the like, there is the more powerful issue of how off-shore accounts of important and wealthy personalities drain the economies of many countries. A 2016 report by Oxfam estimated that a third of the wealth of rich Africans — about 500 billion US dollars — was kept in off-shore accounts. This resulted in a huge loss in tax revenue, about 1.4 billion a year, for the people, enough to pay for the healthcare of millions of poor. A global network of tax havens enable the very rich to hide 7.6 trillion US dollars.

This is why a firm message to the nation from the government that it will not tolerate off-shore accounts is imperative. It must be part of the overall endeavour to eradicate

corruption. Private gain should never take precedence over the public good. Parliament should immediately establish a small committee of say 3 persons to investigate thoroughly the Malaysians named in the Pandora Papers with the focus upon the public-office holders. The committee should be independent, credible and committed. Its report should be submitted directly to the Dewan Rakyat for scrutiny within two months of its appointment.

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