

TURNAROUND PLANS

'TH, FELDA MUST EARN BACK TRUST'

Both have deviated from aim of helping Malays perform haj, ending poverty, say experts

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THE new management of Tabung Haji (TH) and Felda must ensure that the proposed restructuring plans for the organisations return them to the objectives of their establishment.

Both TH and Felda have deviated from their main objectives of helping the poor Malays to perform the pilgrimage, and eradicating poverty and improving their livelihoods, respectively, said economists, sociologists and political analysts.

And a bigger task, they said, was to bring back the trust of the Malays in the institutions.

Sociologist Associate Professor Dr Nobaya Ahmad said TH and Felda started with noble intentions.

"It was not meant to be for investment. It was meant for the



Professor Dr Nobaya Ahmad

poor as they needed help from the government to manage their income and wellbeing.

"These institutions gave hope to the poor Malays. Felda helped them to own land and earn a living as agricultural settlers, while TH gave hope for Muslims to go to Makkah to perform the haj. If they were to save on their own, it would never happen.

"News of funds being misused is crushing to the poor. Although TH can say that its members' savings are not affected, their trust in the institution has gone down the drain," she told the *New Straits Times*.

She was asked to comment on the exposé by Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Seri Dr Mujahid Yusof

Rawa on TH and also the White Paper on Felda by Economic Affairs Minister Datuk Seri Azmin Ali in Parliament today. Besides giving the current financial situation of both organisations, the two ministers are expected to share the proposed restructuring plans drawn up by their current managements.

Nobaya, who is head of the Social and Development Sciences Department of Universiti Putra Malaysia, said trust, or the word "amanah", was something the Malay community "takes to heart" and acknowledged as "a sacred duty".

"The misappropriation of funds is equivalent to stealing the poor's money."

On Felda, she said, the second and third generations of settlers were struggling to get out of the low-income group. Very few had gained a better life from the government's initiatives.

She said those in the Felda settlements were struggling on a daily basis.

"They continue to talk about ownership. The investments by the authorities should have benefited the settlers to the fullest, but this is not realised."

She said people no longer wanted promises and reaffirmation about the future.

"The task is to rebuild these institutions and gain the people's trust once more," adding that among other changes that should take place included putting a responsible individual in charge of the organisations who would work for the people and not for privileged groups.

TH was established in 1963 to facilitate Muslims' savings for the haj, while Felda was formed in 1956 under the Land Development Ordinance 1956 for the development of land and relocation with the objective of poverty eradication through the cultivation of oil palm and rubber.

Economist Associate Professor Dr Aimi Zulhazmi Abdul Rashid described TH and Felda's deviation from their objectives as a "major blow" and that its economic implications, especially to the government, were "tremendous".

Citing Felda Global Ventures Holdings Bhd as an example, he said "the purpose of investing is to share the wealth with stakeholders, namely the settlers and not just for the pockets of certain individual and serving their political agenda", adding that political intervention in institutions, such as TH and Felda, was "unnecessary and pointless".

He said TH and Felda needed

professionals, not political appointees.

"Those placed there through political means would always invest or frame their business plans according to political benefits and mileage. Projects would be placed at locations of those in power, while development would only come to the targeted voters."

He said they would only opt to please those vital to their political survival, leaving those in other constituencies who had no effect on them in the dark.

Another vital factor that should be taken into consideration, Aimi said, was good governance and transparency of these institutions. He proposed that not only do these organisations report to their respective ministries but also tabled their reports in Parliament.

Political analyst and communications expert Professor Datuk Syed Arabi Syed Abdullah Idid used the Malay idiom "*harapkan pagar, pagar makan padi*" (betrayal of trust by those in positions of responsibility) to describe the current scenario in TH and Felda.

"We always take for granted that Malays are God-fearing, always caring but in reality we are not."