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Focus-Economy

ECONOMIC PROGRESS CHANGES FACE OF NATION & RAKYAT

By: ROSLIWATY RAMLY

KUALA LUMPUR: Forty-three years ago, the average Malaysian could only dream of owning a car, much less a holiday abroad.

Owning a bicycle and a home were about the best thing that a person could hope for, while piped water and electricity were a bonus.

In that span of 43 years, so much had changed for the better that one wonders if the average Malaysian had taken the realisation of these dreams for granted. Or that they had forgotten or conveniently chose to ignore, the trial and tribulations that the nation and their parents and grandparents had to go through for them to reach where they are today.

No doubt, so much had changed for the better since independence that one does require the Report of the Malaysian Quality of Life (1999) or the National Budget of 2000 to tell us how far the nation has progressed economically.

QUALITY OF LIFE

The report said the quality of life index for the 1980-1998 period had jumped from 86.2 points to 105.7 points. The improvements were recorded in such fields as health, income and distribution, education, transportation and communication, housing, family lives, social participation and working environment.

The 2000 budget which was re-tabled in parliament last February, maintained all the allocations pledged before the November 1999 general election. In fact, it added a few more goodies.

This was made possible by the changes and the economic recovery from the financial crisis that hit East Asia in July, 1997.

The budget strategies were in line with pragmatic macroeconomic policies that stress on fiscal stimulus and the environment to jump-start the private sector as the engine of growth.

At the same time, students, pensioners, farmers and civil servants also benefitted from the budget. For example, the new millennium brought a bonus to the 400,000 pensioners who were given a 10 percent upward revision, along with a 10 percent salary increase for civil servants.

RISING FOREIGN TRADE SURPLUS

What also kept the economy shinning was foreign trade which continued to record surpluses. The year 1999 saw a surplus of RM72.3 billion, the largest ever recorded.

The economic fundamentals and performance are growing from strength to strength, giving the investors the needed boost and confidence in the nation's economy.

The KLSE also regained its stature. Local investors jumped for joy on last Jan 17 when the KLCI, the market barometer, touched 953.42 points for the first time in two years.

The index was as Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad had forecast earlier -- that the KLCI would breach the 900 point soon.

Malaysia's success in tackling its non-performing loans (NPL) and capital injection into its banking system means that its financial and corporate sector are getting stronger.

The pro-active policies introduced by the government not only contributed to economic growth but also made Malaysia one of the emerging economic powerhouse of Southeast Asia.

Malaysia's economic success can be partly explained by its belief and confidence in a free market and by its economic management strategies that were on the right track.

PAST RECOVERY THRESHOLD

That Malaysia has moved beyond the threshold of recovery is evident from the economic indicators thus far.

Based on planning and strategies that were acknowledged as appropriate, world economic analysts and observers said the Malaysian economy also played an effective role in lifting the nation's socio-culture today.

Once again, credit must be given to Dr Mahathir, who managed to pull the country out of the financial crisis without resorting to a bail-out by world financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

The bold measures of selective foreign exchange control and the pegging of the ringgit at 3.80 to the American dollar had shielded the nation from currency speculators, though these measures drew flaks from critics, foreign economic analysts and media.

K-ECONOMY

The announcement of the masterplan for the knowledge-based economy or K-economy was warmly received because K-economy is an asset which the rakyat cannot do without.

With the new millennium and the changes it heralds, the country will be confronted with new challenges, in line with the quickening pace of globalisation and liberalisation that would render the world borderless along with the rapid developments in information technology (IT).

In this context, the Malaysian citizens have no choice but to master IT. Any failure to do so would be a handicapp.

This is because Information Technology and Communication as well as electronic commerce (E-commerce) have vital roles in the lifestyle of people in the coming decade.

Failure to master IT or failure to generate that critical mass of human resource conversant with IT, would leave the nation and rakyat far behind others in this comtemporary world.

Indirectly, the investment spent on training Malaysians in ICT would lead to the realisation of the K-Economy blueprint.

The implementation of the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) is seen as an investment for the future of the people to master IT and other knowledge.

However, all the sophistication and development offered by MSC will come to naught if the people do not participate in it.

Now, even though Malaysia has attained a satisfactory growth rate, it still needs comprehensive policies to meet future challenges.

There has to be a right balance between economic growth and the well-being and prosperity of the rakyat.

What is certain is that the national leaders must be able to strategise and act fast to raise the country's resilience and competitive edge, to face these challenges.

TAKING THINGS FOR GRANTED

Given the present scenario, one wonders if the average Malaysian has taken all these developments for granted, that he or she is unable to appreciate what the nation and rakyat have today.

Otherwise, how could one explain the last words of the Oman ambassador to Malaysia, Salim M. Al Wahaibi, last week.

"Count your blessings and be grateful, especially when the National Day celebration is just around the corner," said the outgoing Omani envoy who has spent six years in Malaysia.

He said the people of this country should be grateful as they were blessed with so many things, ranging from its peaceful multi-racial society, beautiful land, stable government and a growing economy.

"What else is there to say...You (Malaysians) are blessed. You have everything. You are lucky. You manufacture your own car, your own electronic equipment, and you are able to choose and do different things to your lives and you are happy," he said. -- Bernama

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