

01/01/2000

Malaysia needs to change direction of socio-economic planning, policy

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THE new Cabinet has been chosen and Malaysia is all set to face the new 21st century starting today! Happy New Year to Malaysia and to all Malaysians! May God continue to bless us all with peace, harmony and an even better quality of life.

However, we have to make this wish really work, otherwise it will remain - just a hope and a prayer.

The opportunity for Malaysia to rise to greater heights is now upon us. The new Cabinet has been challenged to respond more effectively. The people's message is quite clear - although Malaysia has already achieved relatively great success, as a developing country, we have to change the direction of our socio-economic planning and policies.

The changes in policy direction call for Government plans to be much more 'people oriented rather than profit oriented'.

As a first step forward, we need to improve our Electoral process. There have been many public complaints about the inadequacies, which have to be explained or rectified urgently. This is necessary as uncertainties undermine business and investment confidence especially from abroad.

It is therefore gratifying that the Election Commission has admitted that the election process needs to be improved as the election laws have not been revised since colonial times!

We should also direct more of our priorities and our resources, to improving the welfare of the rakyat.

The needs of the rural and urban poor are not unreasonable nor too expensive for Malaysia to afford. Much higher allocations could be made to meet the basic needs like, housing, schools, clinics and hospitals, water and electricity, especially in those depressed rural and urban areas where they are lacking.

Could we not have a New Socio-Economic Plan that would give much more meaning to the first prong of the National Development Policy - which is to eradicate poverty, regardless of race?

Can we honestly claim that we have adhered to the real spirit behind this laudable policy?

Why for instance, is it so difficult to build sufficient low and medium-cost houses?

The developers tell us that it is extremely cumbersome to get suitable land from the State governments for housing. We continue to hear of delays and hassles getting multifarious approvals, to meet the diverse rules and regulations by so many local authorities!

These are the kind of core issues that our newly elected representatives have to address with renewed commitment.

* Can't the local authorities be revamped so that they are made more accountable to the rakyat?

Why can't we have more representation on these local authorities instead of having mere nominees, who may not feel answerable to the rakyat, whom they are supposed to serve.

* What has been said about the local authorities can be levelled at the Federal Government departments that provide 'counter services' to the general public. I dare say that the Government lost a lot of votes from frustrated members of the public who have suffered at one time or another from inefficient public services at the ground level.

* Another important area where policy direction has to change is in the

financial and banking system. It needs to be strengthened at a much faster pace.

The consolidation of our banking system has therefore to forge ahead with greater urgency. There have been too many delays, which we can least afford.

Provided that the criteria for mergers are fair and transparent, the public will strongly support the Government's efforts, regardless of those owners who would want to protect their own narrow vested interests.

Government has to change direction and be tougher with those who seek to enhance the private interest at the expense of the public interest.

We should also change direction with all our important national institutions, such as the civil service, the judicial system and the enforcement agencies. They should all be thoroughly reviewed to enable us to meet the new challenges of Globalisation.

For instance it is regrettable that some foreign investors prefer that their commercial disputes should be settled in other countries and not in our courts. This may be an indication that they do not have enough faith in our judicial system. This kind of perception will not be good for the promotion of a healthy investment climate.

Just like the economists are consulted by the Ministry of Finance at Annual Budget Dialogues, all these professional groups and the significant non-Governmental organisations need to be sincerely consulted by the new cabinet ministers on how our national competitiveness and public welfare can be further enhanced.

* The standards of corporate governance could also be significantly raised speedily. The Malaysian Securities Commission has come out with an excellent report on corporate governance. It is important that its many recommendations are implemented not only in the letter but in the spirit of its intentions.

The new Government has a big responsibility in changing the public perception that more things are promised by many politicians rather than delivered by them.

Thus although the Malaysian economy is recovering well from the Asian crisis, we are in danger of reverting to uncertainty, if we do not take remedial action to implement more professional business standards.

This can only happen if those responsible for bad management in the past are replaced by more professional and competent corporate leaders, who can also stand up to pressures of undue external interferences.

These new corporate leaders must be able to set high standards of integrity so as to be able to clamp down more effectively on the universal problem of corruption and unethical business practices.

It is therefore important that not only should greater action be taken to curb corruption but also that this action must also be actually seen to be taken.

The new Government could also review all the legislation that is regarded, rightly or wrongly as 'obnoxious'. The Internal Security Act, the Sedition Act, the Police Act, and the Universities, University Colleges Act and the Printing Presses Act, inter alia, of course readily come to mind.

Is it not possible that some of these Acts are already outdated in this time and age? Haven't the Malaysian society and circumstances and environment considerably changed since Merdeka. Shouldn't these laws therefore be amended to further enhance Malaysia's competitive edge in the new era of globalisation?

Then what about the many National Policies that have served us well in the past and which could also be refined further to make them more pertinent and beneficial to the New Malaysia of the 21 century?

The New Development Policy, the Look East Policy, Malaysia Incorporated, and the Privatisation Policy can contribute much more to our national well-being, if the weaknesses therein are removed.

For instance, much more could be done to ensure that the 30 per cent equity shares reserved for Bumiputeras, are indeed spread out to many more Bumiputeras. This will not only be fairer but would provide the opportunity for more Bumiputeras.

It would also be in keeping with Malaysia's pragmatic policies if the present Foreign Investment Guidelines are made much more transparent and attractive. At present there is considerable uncertainty as to the guidelines in the implementation of the policy.

The New Cabinet, under the dynamic leadership of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has the great privilege and responsibility to lead Malaysia into the 21st century.

I hope that the rakyat's signals for change of policy directions will be seriously studied and acted upon, as indeed the Prime Minister has urged his Ministers and Mentris Besar, to fulfill their election pledges.

If all the legitimate aspirations of the people are fully met by the new Government, we will have a New Malaysia where our leaders will gain even more appreciation and the support of the rakyat, to make Malaysia a model country for peace and prosperity, in the new millennium.

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