

16/02/2003

Between the prime minister and nature

A Kadir Jasin

IT WOULD appear that not even the Prime Minister's tears of blood would stop the abuse of the land by state authorities and their agents.

Short of shedding tears of blood, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has done everything humanly possible to encourage responsible and environmentally friendly land development since the early days of his stewardship two decades ago.

It started with the defiance of his instruction to the builders of Universiti Utara Malaysia in Sintok, Kedah, not to resort to clear felling of the site. They not only cut down every tree at the site but conveniently made the mistake of logging the surrounding forests as well.

Then, some years ago, the Press again went to town with his comments about the cutting of hilltops and the pollution of streams and waterfalls in Fraser's Hill. Here, hills were cut and valleys filled to build a high-rise condominium and golf course.

This was followed by what he saw while flying over Hulu Klang in a helicopter in 1997. A housing developer had not only indiscriminately cleared the forest but had also levelled the hills and filled the valleys.

The development was traced to one Projek Ikatan Rapi Sdn Bhd, a subsidiary of Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange-listed Larut Consolidated Bhd.

And the practice has not changed despite promises of action and harsh warnings by state and local authorities. In fact, it has worsened in the aftermath of the 1997 regional financial crisis when developers cut corners to save cost and the authorities looked the other way in an effort to stimulate the economy.

These days, even the media hardly mentions the environmental impact assessment anymore. What is worse is that state-sanctioned land grab continues. Even forest reserves, green lungs and patches of gardens are no longer safe.

Living on the fat of the land

This scribe recalls the Prime Minister privately lamenting the attitude of the state governments, in particular Selangor, towards land use some years ago.

It started with the Malay Mail campaigning against plans to turn a sizeable portion of the Sungai Buloh forest into a private golf course. The newspaper had published a picture of the land being cleared despite widespread public objection.

Pointing to the report, the Prime Minister said: 'The Menteri Besar met me a few days ago. I asked him to allocate more land to build low-cost houses to resettle the squatters. He told me Selangor is short of land. But look, he is giving land for golf courses.'

A few years later, when the Menteri Besar in question was contesting a top post in the Umno Supreme Council, several newspaper editors were 'requested' by the leader of the 'team' to support him.

The then Editor-in-Chief of the Utusan Melayu Group, Datuk Johan Jaaffar, and this scribe declined. The news of our refusal immediately reached the Menteri Besar and he promptly requested for a meeting. I went to his office and related to him what the Prime Minister had said about him.

More than a decade has passed since Dr Mahathir made the request for more land to build houses for the squatters and people in the lower income group, but Selangor is still grappling with squatter problems irrespective

of plans and slogans.

In the meantime, the state has undergone three changes of Menteri Besar, while hills, forests and rivers continue to be destroyed and countless encik and misters have been made Datuks and Tan Sris on account of the millions they have made from plundering the land.

It would appear that in some states, land has built and destroyed political careers. Yet, as the saying goes, fools never learn. The environment and state governments

As for the stop work orders and other knee-jerk reactions from the state governments, I am afraid they may not enjoy a high level of credibility.

They are repetitions of the same old story. The Prime Minister speaks. The Menteri Besar and Chief Ministers dive for cover. The stop work orders are issued and the Press goes to town with the story.

When the Prime Minister moves on to other things, the stop work orders are conveniently forgotten and the destruction continues.

It is clear that these people are merely reacting to the Prime Minister, who happens to be concerned about the environment. They react only to him and not, say, to the minister responsible for the environment or the environmental law and regulations.

Otherwise, how do we explain the lack of response to an identical comment made by the Deputy Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, some weeks ago about hillside development in Cameron Highlands?

But when Abdullah becomes Prime Minister and shows concern for the environment as Dr Mahathir does, I am sure the Menteri Besar and Chief Ministers will also dive for cover when he speaks.

It would appear that in most cases the stop work orders are meant to safeguard their jobs rather than the forests and the hills.

If this is not the case, then why should they wait for the Prime Minister to speak up? He has a lot more important things to do. After all, he has no direct power over land matters. Land is a state affair.

The forests, rivers, lakes and swamps are the responsibility of the Menteri Besar and Chief Ministers. They are the ones who have a final say on matters relating to these God-given assets. Develop, but responsibly

The Prime Minister is not against land development. In fact, he has argued at home and abroad that the beauty of a country has no meaning if the people are poor.

What he is against is irresponsible land development. Look at Langkawi where he is the chief architect. Forests, hills and beaches have been developed with minimal damage.

Menteri Besar and Chief Ministers can still use land to enrich their states and build formidable political power for themselves, but they should not succumb to the pressure and promises of loggers and opportunists.

As for property developers, it is not fair to judge them purely by the number of houses they have built and the amount of profits they have made.

Surely, they can make a lot of money by slashing and levelling every hill and filling every valley with little regard for the environment and aesthetics, or when they are turning a rubber or oil palm estate into a housing project.

We should give more consideration to developers who are working hard to reclaim and rehabilitate disused tin mines and reclaimed land into beautiful housing and recreational projects like The Mines, Sunway Lagoon and Langkawi Lagoon.

The suggestion that developers and contractors who destroy the environment be sent to jail will not solve the problem of environmental destruction as long as Menteri Besar, Chief Ministers, their executive

councillors and district officers continue to be in cahoots with these people.

These people become irresponsible because the system offers them protection either due to incompetency or corruption. The officers responsible should be held responsible as well.

DOING AWAY WITH DOUBT

THOSE people questioning Dr Mahathir's seriousness about transferring power to his deputy at the end of the year should take note of two recent major news items - one on the general election, and the other, on the Cabinet reshuffle.

The Prime Minister has said that the date of the coming general election, which is not likely to be held before his departure in October, would be determined by Abdullah, and that no further Cabinet reshuffles will take place prior to that.

Without trying to second guess the Prime Minister, one can take his statements to mean that he is not going to decide on the date of the election and he will not make any more changes to the Cabinet.

But there is nothing to stop Abdullah and Umno from influencing him on the date of the election should they think it is best held before he leaves.

As for the Cabinet, a deliberate reshuffle may not happen but should there be resignations, then the Prime Minister can still consider filling the vacancies.

This cannot be discounted as some ministers have either submitted their resignations or have indicated the desire to retire.

Of course, this can also be taken to mean that the Prime Minister is not accepting any of those resignations. But ministers are still free to go if they are really serious about their intentions.

It is unfair and unproductive to keep questioning the seriousness of the Prime Minister's intention to retire at the end of the year and his designation of Abdullah as his successor.