

25/05/2003

Economic package, a dose of politics have 'em all talking

Ahmad A. Talib

WHEN is the election, a small-time businessman asked me the other day. In between mouthfuls of nasi lemak and teh tarik, Joe asked if he was correct in assuming that the general election is around the corner. It's not the first time I've been asked this question, and I'm quite sure that won't be the last either.

I normally rely on the standard answer. Only the Prime Minister knows, and he's not about to share this piece of information with others right now. If I know, then I'm definitely in the wrong profession.

Joe raised the question after Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad announced the stimulus package on Wednesday. The package was really good and smelt of election, Joe said. I attended the Press conference at Putrajaya, and Joe was under the impression that people like me know more than what's printed. That's wrong. Joe is not alone with that kind of impression, and no matter how much I tell him, Joe simply refuses to accept my explanation that I have no prior knowledge of what goes on in the Prime Minister's mind.

In fact, Dr Mahathir was asked at the Press conference whether the four strategies covering 90 measures aimed at stimulating the economy were a forerunner to the general election. Whether the election did figure in his mind when preparing the strategies, nobody really knows. But observers cannot help but feel the package has raised the hopes for the rakyat with more than ample opportunities for the private sector to move the economy.

But a young entrepreneur I met on Friday sounded a bit cynical. He was sure the package was intended to help businessmen, especially small and medium-scale operators. He himself has been helping an old friend to seek help from the Government's financial institutions to kick-start his business.

"I've climbed numerous stairs, met countless officers and managers, filled forms of all kinds and colours, attended interviews. I've left all possible contact numbers. But at the end of the day, I find myself meeting the neighbourhood Along because the institutions I went to weren't prepared to help.

"I read that millions of ringgit are being made available. Unless these government-owned financial institutions are prepared to change their way of doing things, I'm afraid the neighbourhood Alongs are here to stay. I'm told that the bureaucracy in these institutions will be simplified, which is most commendable and timely. I hope they are not just for window-dressing sake by bank managers who would prefer moving golf balls and befriending GROs at karaoke lounges to helping the SARS-affected and war-threatened economy."

Dr Mahathir, as Finance Minister, announced the package. It is now up to his young sidekick Datuk Jamaludin Jarjis to do his bit. Appearing on television talk shows on consecutive nights is good, but more on-the-ground monitoring is needed. With better time management, JJ, as he's often referred to, needs to kick butts if the package is not meeting targets.

As a young minister, Jamaludin has the energy and drive to put things right. He ought to meet and listen more to the assessment of small and medium-scale businessmen who find the going tough. Many of these businessmen are encouraged by news that repayment of loans from these institutions is going to be more "friendly".

Perhaps Jamaludin should start showing early positive results to certain measures announced in the package to win over cynics who keep questioning the effectiveness of some Government initiatives. There is nothing to stop these institutions from "marketing" the package by organising short, very focused seminars and workshops. Introducing the package is one thing, getting the target groups to respond is another.

While the stimulus package is being digested, the Finance Ministry is already preparing for next year's Budget, which friends say will be tabled in September. I'm sure the authorities will announce more measures to help the economy to be more resilient than it is. Part of that resilience, I must say, is in politics. And there's certainly been much political news in the last couple of days.

The MCA, a senior member of the national coalition, enters a new phase in its history with the resignation (finally - some cynics said) of its president Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik and his deputy Datuk Lim Ah Lek. Still only 60, Dr Ling and Lim, 61, have many good years ahead to help strengthen the MCA and restore party unity.

Their respective replacements, Datuk Seri Ong Ka Ting and Datuk Chan Kong Choy, are young leaders upon whose shoulders the MCA central working committee has placed their trust and hopes. I remember covering an assignment in Japan, China and Tibet in the mid-80s led by Tun Ghafar Baba, then Deputy Prime Minister. Dr Ling and Ong were also on that trip. Ong has certainly come a long way.

As for Dr Ling, I remember standing side by side with him as we answered the call of nature in the wee hours of the morning next to a coconut tree in Lumut when he was Deputy Minister of Finance.

Chan, one of two present-day Deputy Minister of Finance, must have been very upset to have found his house burgled last Thursday. But this must have been a good omen, because whatever he lost that night has been replaced by his promotion within the party ranks. As long as Ong and Chan remain committed to the cause of the Barisan Nasional, the MCA will do well. Good luck to both!

But the best political news, as far as I'm concerned, came from Dr Mahathir who made it very clear and simple that wakil rakyat who fail to do their work would not be made a candidate again. Repeated absence from state assemblies and the Dewan Rakyat is enough evidence of their lack of commitment.

There are wakil rakyat and wakil rakyat. I know a few who work very hard lobbying for nomination and then work even harder to retain their position. This is how it should be. But there are also those who keep long hours to develop their personal profile for the sole purpose of self-preservation.

I believe Dr Mahathir's comments are not meant to stir sleeping wakil rakyat into genuine service. It's a little late for those who have not been doing their job to repair the damage they have done to themselves and their party. I also like to think that Dr Mahathir's comments are not going to stop there. In fact, I expect more action than words of warning or advice.

There could be subtle messages to long-serving and no-longer-effective wakil rakyat to consider vacating their posts and to give younger leaders a chance to contribute at a higher level. The process of re-generation will continue. Dr Mahathir himself has shown the way and it now depends on others who may choose to see and act, rather than be blind and deaf, not to mention selfish and greedy.