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Time to pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps

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WHAT is the assessment of the Malaysian economy in mid 2003? The economic package introduced last month will help the economy to recover from the adverse effects of SARS and the US-UK invasion of Iraq but the damage cannot be entirely rectified.

Hence the earlier estimate made in the Budget Speech last September for a growth of 6-6.5 per cent for 2003 is very unlikely.

Bank Negara's March estimate of a 4.5 per cent growth for this year is more probable, but only if the economy gathers stronger momentum in the second half of this year.

We have, therefore, to pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps since Foreign Direct Investment is not sufficiently forthcoming for now.

We have to also to optimise the use of all our available human and capital resources, to develop the domestic economy.

Thus the Yang di-Pertuan Agong Tuanku Syed Sirajuddin in his birthday address to the nation on June 6 advised Malaysians to support the Government in its efforts to ensure the well being of the people, irrespective of race, religion, sex and place of origin.

The King also called on his subjects to improve productivity and to make the economy stronger and more competitive. But is the King's noble call being taken seriously?

Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Badawi also stated at the Indian Chamber of Commerce 75th Anniversary dinner that the Barisan Government adopts an open attitude.

We do not want any community to be left behind - educationally, economically or socially, he had said.

Coming from the Deputy Prime Minister, just a few months before he takes over the reins of Government in October, these remarks are most encouraging.

The full implementation of this important policy statement will surely sustain strong economic growth, better income distribution and social justice, as well as national unity. But will his policies be properly implemented?

Unfortunately, however, there are still wide gaps between many sound policies and weak implementation.

These serious gaps have led to growing public credibility issues which have not been adequately addressed as yet.

Hence, all Government policies need to be assessed in terms of their slow progress and who actually benefits from these national policies.

What proportion of the really poor gain from subsidised loans, micro financing, scholarships and community projects.

Are these benefits distributed according to basic needs criteria or some other considerations?

Then again, are the beneficiaries of Government policies ethnically balanced or are Budget expenditures lopsided in their distribution?

Are we giving the proper priority to Budget expenditures?

If so, why do we have these embarrassingly frequent and disruptive floods in Kuala Lumpur?

If the constant flooding is due to poor environmental management, especially by the State Governments, why is the Federal Government unsuccessful in pulling up the State Governments and the local authorities for all their gross negligence and irresponsibilities.

The public expect the Federal Government to be more firm in its management. Overall the public also needs to see more transparency and accountability in the utilisation of their taxes, to increase public confidence in Good Governance.

But why is the public so timid in their protests against mismanagement? Are we complacent? Then we deserve what we get.

Or is the public unwilling to be even constructively critical for fear of repercussions under the Internal Security Act?

It is far fetched to imagine that the Government will penalise its citizens for airing legitimate grievances.

Nevertheless the appropriate authorities have to put our economic house in better order before Malaysians get more impatient and express their disenchantment through the ballot box.

There are many who feel left out in the full participation in the development of the economy.

Students with even more than 9As who are not given scholarships or even places at our local universities get disillusioned.

We need to reward our bright and poor students to strengthen their self respect, national pride and our national unity. Otherwise they will lose faith in their elders and our socio economic system.

Hence there must be more transparency in the implementation of the meritocracy system to increase public confidence.

Small competent entrepreneurs who do not have the right connections complain of not being able to get bank loans - soft or hard. So they are forced to go to the loan sharks who often tear their businesses apart - and weaken the backbone of our local industries.

There needs to be an objective study as to why the Government has not been able to do much more to assist the SMIs' contribution to economic growth.

Corrupt officials in local authorities, like the Ampang Jaya Municipal Council, and many other government agencies bog down the approval processes unless they are rewarded, directly or indirectly.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has warned that local council officials who are derelict in their duties will be replaced.

It would be better if they are severely punished publicly for abusing public confidence and the people's funds.

We have to be much tougher in fighting the curse of corruption or this problem will keep recurring.

All these inefficiencies add to the cost of doing business and sharply erode our international competitiveness and inhibit our economic growth and income distribution.

As the Prime Minister pointed out at the Transparency and Integrity Dinner - to honour three of our great leaders, Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman, Tun Tan Siew Sin and Tun Ismail Mohamad Ali for their impeccable integrity - that corruption is a poison.

But are we doing enough to prevent corruption from killing the economy softly and even corroding our national sovereignty? I doubt it.

This is the time when we are reminded of another illustrious civil servant and pause to pay a lasting tribute to the exemplary life and career of the late Raja Tun Mohar Badiozaman.

We all wish our country has many more officials with Raja Mohar's intense devotion to duty, to serve God, king and country.

His high standards of quality and performance, responsibility, integrity, diplomacy and charm are qualities that we should emulate.

Although he was of royal lineage, he never asked for special privileges and it was through pure merit that he earned affection, loyalty and great respect for his achievements that were widely recognised.

Indeed the Government should launch a Public Lecture series to honour and learn from his great contributions to our country's socio-economic development.

The Malaysian economy is gaining strength in mid 2003.

However, it could falter again if we do not speedily address some outstanding sensitive and structural economic challenges facing the country.