

A vainglorious Malaysia
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Whenever confronted with hard truths, Malaysian ministers used to simper a lame excuse. Now they have digressed even further by either standing still and looking silly, or just blaming their predecessors.

After the catastrophic earthquake and tsunami caused a nuclear emergency on an unprecedented scale in Japan, our Energy, Green Technology and Water Minister Peter Chin Fah Kui could not confirm if the proposal to construct nuclear power plants had been approved. He was struggling to put on an awkward smile, knowing that he had been sort of sleeping on his job.

When he finally confirmed the proposal was still awaiting approval, it contradicted an earlier statement by Deputy Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin. Who is telling the truth?

Then came Hishammuddin Hussein, who defended the stamping of the impounded copies of the Bible by arguing that it was part of a standard procedure which dated back to the days when Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Abdullah Ahmad Badawi were in charge. The core issue here is: why is such a practice necessary in the first place?

The home minister was acutely aware this would fall short of placating his critics, and is now turning to Perak mufti Harussani Zakaria for help.

One may fail to see the connection between the nuclear energy issue and the dispute over the circulation of the Malay-language Bible. But these incidents highlight again the two staggering features of the Barisan Nasional government: frantic pursuit of development regardless of its consequences, and the dangerous habit of shoring up its support by playing the role of an Islamic vanguard.

Mahathir argues in his memoirs for the need to build the gigantic Bakun Dam in Sarawak. There were also plans to carry electricity over to the peninsula through a 600km-long cable. It would have again put Malaysia 'on the world map'. Being one of the rare occasions on which good sense prevailed, Mahathir dropped the idea due to potential risks entailed.

Obsession with modern technology

But the government's obsession with modern technology refuses to die a quiet death. In 2003, it was announced that Tokyo-based Ebara Corporation had been awarded a contract 'through an internal bidding process' to build a huge incinerator in Broga, near Semenyih in Selangor. Residents rose to protest for fear of dioxin pollution.

Their worries were legitimate. Prior to that, a traditional mass-burn incinerator managed by Ebara in Fujisawa, Japan, was forced to close in 1999 as contaminated wastewater was released into the Hikichi River.

Malaysia never seems to learn. Way back in 1979, a joint venture with a Japanese multinational corporation was set up and named Asian Rare Earth (ARE) to dispose of radioactive waste in Bukit Merah, Perak, jeopardizing the health of local residents. The case was brought to courts but a final verdict was deferred. When ARE was finally closed in 1994

- rather ignominiously - the plaintiffs were still awaiting compensation.

To date, there has been no solution to the problem of the 'export of pollution'. As citizens of the development countries become more environmentally conscious, companies find it increasingly difficult to implement controversial projects locally. Costs are also on the rise in view of the enhanced safety measures required by law. This was the reason why the Japanese were lured into Malaysia to build waste disposal facilities or incinerators.

It is the same with others. Come September this year, the Australian mining corporation Lynas will start operating a massive refining plant at Gebeng, near Kuantan, which it claims will meet about 'a third of the global demand for rare earth metals within two years'.

Is it not mind-boggling that Lynas would take the trouble to ship ores all the way from the Mine Weld mine in western Australia to be processed in Malaysia? Not quite, because we now know the Malaysian government has offered the Aussies a very lucrative deal (with a tax waiver of up to 12 years!), and the protection laws Down Under are so rigorously enforced that the company was compelled to look elsewhere.

Satisfying our ego

Human beings are vainglorious, and need to be acknowledged. Perhaps it is the same with small countries like Malaysia. We are so insignificant that we constantly have to construct the longest, the biggest and the tallest just to satisfy our ego, a Boleh spirit fanatically cultivated and bequeathed by Mahathir himself. But are we not doing all this at the expense of the current and the future generations?

Malaysians are told ad nauseam that, since the developed world has nuclear plants, we must also have at least one or two to make us look good; Hong Kong has a super-efficient MRT system so Kuala Lumpur must have it also. Of course, when people in Japan, the United States and Europe can easily afford branded goods, our 'First Lady' should be entitled to them too.

However, the West also has free and fair elections, freedom of the press, independence of judiciary, open yet rational religious dialogues and the right to peaceful assembly, but it is most ironical that Malaysians are not allowed to have any of these!

Now Christians are not even permitted to read the Bible in Malay. As more and more Malays are now able to read and write English, don't be shocked if one day the Umnoputras deem it imperative to impound English-language Bibles - ostensibly to protect the Muslim faith - while nuclear and chemical threats are lurking behind.