

**Beware of populist policies, they can undermine reform**  
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COMMENT Watching recent events and statements by Malaysian politicians, the urgent need for reform in our country risks being undermined by populism on both sides of the political divide as they jostle for votes in the coming general elections.

From the BN, we have seen the free hand-outs of RM100 to every student in the school system without any form of means testing. We have also recently witnessed the extreme form of populism, namely "mobocracy", whereby mob rule can dictate that a perfectly legal and peaceful gathering, Seksualiti Merdeka, be banned by the police.

Pakatan Rakyat has also indulged in populism since they came into power, which makes us wonder about the substance of 'reformasi'.

First, the Selangor state government gave away free water without any form of means testing and without thinking about "demand management" which is crucial to water conservation.

Now, to the suggestion that we should look into making the civil service lean and mean, Pakatan says that while this makes economic sense, it is politically foolhardy.

One wonders if the promised rescindment of the New Economic Policy will later be similarly jettisoned because of 'political consideration'.

#### Progressive means testing

During the 50s and 60s, Malaysian schools had some form of means testing to ensure that deserving students (ie. those from lower-income families) could have access to fee waivers, free textbooks and even free meals.

Such a progressive policy was a prudent use of valuable resources and did not create any resentment among the better-off students. In contrast, the hand-out of RM100 recently promised by the BN government to every student regardless of income is not only an imprudent use of taxpayers' money, it is likely to be ridiculed as meaningless by the students from rich families.

Likewise, the populist granting of free water by the Selangor government to all and sundry.

Why should those who squander water in washing their cars every day be entitled to free water? How do the Orang Asli feel about such wastage when they were displaced from their ancestral land for the Selangor dam, supposedly because they had been told the dam was vital for the needs of the Klang Valley?

Is such a populist measure congruent with the call for demand management, which is crucial to water conservancy everywhere in the world? It makes nonsense of the call for rainwater harvesting when we can have access to free treated water.

#### Full audit and action

Every organisational transformation - especially in the loss-making government agencies - needs a full audit and swift remedial action to follow. That is what the BN government's recent razzmatazz about "transformation this and transformation that" ought to be about. Nowhere is this more obvious than in our heavily bloated civil service.

For example, our power plants have failed to run at full capacity, about which I have repeatedly called for

thorough audits. The crisis in our energy industry is certainly not just due to the current gas shortage.

The same can be said for the decades-old mismanagement and inefficiencies in KTM (Keretapi Tanah Melayu).

In my 2010 book, 'Questioning Arms Spending in Malaysia', I not only called for the drastic reduction of our defence budget but also the conversion of arms production to socially useful production and the promotion of a culture of peace. The billions of ringgit in savings could be used for creating thousands of jobs.

Likewise, any shake up of our civil service need not necessarily lead to unemployment. It could lead to leaner and more efficient organisations, jobs retraining and the creation of more alternative sectors.

Going down the slippery slope

Many highly profitable industries such as our highways and public utilities could be nationalised and operated by our civil servants. Since the end of the jungle war, the police field force can be redeployed for community policing and not for breaking up peaceful assemblies.

To better serve the local community, social services such as the provision of public housing, education and transport need to be professionally and productively managed, decentralised and handled by elected local authorities.

We should apply our minds to retraining and redeploying our human resources. Jobs do not necessarily have to be lost in any conversion. Remember World War Two when we were forced to develop our domestic industries and grow our own food as a result of restrictions on foreign imports.

Then again, when the war came to an end, every country had to convert their war production machinery to civilian production. This was no easy transition but every country managed to achieve this transformation.

Failure to demonstrate such flexibility and implement the necessary reforms will see us going down the slippery slope that countries such as Greece and Italy find themselves in today.

We can say goodbye to reformasi if the national agenda for change is usurped by populist desperadoes.

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