

Najib: Let them eat cake
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Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak's motivation, when he instructed editors to refrain from using words like 'price hike', was designed to save his ego from a storm of public criticism. We are not against cuts in subsidies and belt tightening measures, but housekeeping begins at home. If his government were to tackle the eye-watering wastage and corruption first, then we might believe that he was sincere.

At the prime ministers's directive, mainstream-media papers got creative, with choice phrases like 'new prices' or harga baru. In these straitened times, sensitive words like 'price rise' might inflame Malaysians.

One paper gave this latest prime ministerial assignment a macho spin with, 'Gov't bold move will have minimal impact on people, says PM'. Maybe there is a niche market in starting a Malaysian political 'bull****phrases.com' site.

A few daily newspapers felt this mental exercise too taxing and simply buried the news in the inner pages or excluded them altogether. Maybe they think 'What you don't know can't hurt you'.

azlanThe 'government think-tank', an oxymoron if ever there were one, must believe that we are a bunch of dim-witted 15-year-olds. We are outraged, but not because of fancy words like 'upward price adjustment'. We see through fancy terminology masking the true meaning.

Just as 'social health executive' is a janitor, 'media distribution officer' is a paperboy, or 'subsidy rationalisation' is a price-hike.

If this 'think-tank' needed reminding, our adverse reaction centres on the manner in which the statement was made, and its accompanying excuses.

Najib's ego has suffered a serious dent. He was stung by his gambling license debacle. The unprecedented public anger united all the communities, like no other political party has ever managed.

Then there were the other U-turns like the proposed move of the parliament complex to Putrajaya at a cost of RM800 million, which raised the public's ire. We were shocked when the cost of the construction of the Agong's palace ballooned to RM800 million. Like most things in government, we only know about ostentatious projects when they are almost complete.

A real cynical suggestion

When junior ministers reassure us that the government exercises fiscal austerity, we dread to think what lavish is.

If the government were to back out of the contracts to build these white elephants and monuments to BN, compensation will have to be paid. Throwing good money after bad makes it all the more necessary to have transparency, public consultation and open tenders for projects that are paid for from the public purse.

Although the government engineered this 'price hike' announcement to reduce public outcry, the effect was lost because it simultaneously released figures about this year's allocation of RM4 billion for the 44,000 personnel in the Prime Minister's Department.

What has this bloated department to show for the RM3.8 billion it spent last year? The president's office in Indonesia (population 242.9 million) receives RM634 million; The PM's department in Singapore (population 4.7 million) gets RM677 million.

In the mid-nineteenth century, the British Foreign Office managed the British Empire with just 600 people. Today, Taiwan (population 28 million) has 530,000 government employees; Malaysia (population 28 million) employs 1.2 million civil servants.

AZLAN We have 44,000 staff in one department, which is awash with cash but with little impact on our lives.

Najib says the cuts will save the government RM750 million per year. However, we had to bear the cost of wasteful projects, '1Malaysia' clinics and the Permata educational programmes of 'the First Lady'. Don't the interests of the Malaysian public come first?

Najib stressed that the price hikes would curb a burgeoning government deficit, root out smuggling and reduce sugar consumption, to 'help keep Malaysians healthy'.

He mentioned rooting out smuggling but did not acknowledge the root causes of corruption.

Moreover, it is cynical to suggest that the high price of sugar will lead to more healthy Malaysians. People in the low income bracket depend on sugar for a cheap source of energy. If he were serious about improving their health, he would have driven home a healthy lifestyle message through health programmes, education and sport in school.

For decades, his party did little to improve the lot of the poor. These subsidies affect all Malaysians and have the same deleterious effect as the NEP on the Malays. Dependence. Thus, weaning people off subsidies will be as difficult as weaning Malays off the NEP.

Steering a sinking ship

Petrol has gone up but the number of toll roads and toll costs has increased. We are dependent on cars as the public transport system is non-existent.

Very soon the subsidy for electricity will be removed and yet, a night time drive shows brightly illuminated government departments. Civil servants working overtime. Probably.

Anyone who has been to a government meeting will notice the free food. Even a tender proposal will include a lavish spread. We hear of 'study-trips' abroad or ministers travelling with a retinue of assistants/advisers. How about those adverts in foreign newspapers for self-aggrandisement? US\$5 million can pay for a lot of teachers and nurses.

Ultimately someone - the taxpayer - pays for our government's failures.

azlan In June, Lembah Pantai Umno chief Raja Nong Chik, said that people could survive on RM3,000 in Kuala Lumpur. Will he dare spin the same yarn now?

Ministers should concentrate their minds on how to cut spending in each of their departments and trim their manpower requirements. Even tackling the abuse of sickness

and absenteeism at work would save millions. Even someone with an IQ of 80 could find an easy way of saving RM4 billion, this year.

Idris Jala must feel he is steering a sinking ship. Ministers are bent on maintaining their corrupt lifestyles. Their tactics have been honed to perfection by years of BN indifference to the public. They have long milked the system and become lemak. They contributed to the mess we are now in.

We never received the kickbacks they enjoyed. Never benefitted from the perks they were offered. We did not cause this financial crisis. We just pick up the bill. All this money comes from us.

If we are to tighten our belts then the PM and his government should lead by example. Najib should clean up his house first and get rid of the corruption which is haemorrhaging our financial reserves. He should eradicate nepotism and cronyism, both of which perpetuate defective traits, much like in-breeding does. It is time the PM entered the real world.

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