

Marry by all means, Najib
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COMMENT There is this story about the Greek philosopher Socrates giving a young man advice on whether or not the young man should marry. Socrates' reply was "Marry by all means. If you get a good wife, you'll become happy; if you get a bad one, you'll become a philosopher."

I recollect this story upon reading the government announcement for investing a whopping RM1.4 trillion for the next ten years, widely reported in the mass media and *Malaysiakini* (Sept 21).

Everybody has been informed now that it's purportedly for financing Najib Abdul Razak's 1Malaysia concept incorporating the 'People First, Performance Now' policy, Government Transformation Programme (GTP), New Economic Model (NEM) and 10th Malaysia Plan (2011-2015).

Even at this early stage critics and commentators like for example Nurul Izzah Anwar have stated that this ambitious project might not even half succeed. I agree with their observations and pessimistic views.

And why? Because to me the ambitious amount is dizzying; and, we all know sectarian interests like Perkasa are waiting to destabilise the project. Put the two together and we see a public policy proposal going into the failure bin even before it ever begins.

On this vein I imagine Najib going to Socrates for advice on whether or not to proceed with his NEM. I imagine him getting the reply "Proceed by all means. If you succeeded you'd be a great leader and saviour of the people. If you fail then you become a philosopher."

Genuine and plastic change

Let me explain my pessimism by going back to the New Economic Policy (NEP) which by all accounts has been a dismal failure.

And again, why did I say that? Because the target was just too staggering. At that time Malay participation in the economic field had been at a paltry two percent or so, and this has to be increased to thirty percent in twenty short years.

My point is the NEP paid too little emphasis to the human factor, like the Malay technical skills in business, commerce, and basic technology to respond responsibly to the challenge. I remember the Malays were so far back in economic matters, didn't know how to repair a bicycle tyre, not to mention compiling or analysing a company or corporate balance sheet.



The target therefore has one basic flaw. It was to be secured in isolation i.e. in the absence of other segments of a culture that would support the businessmen and corporate figures required to achieve it.

Where are accompanying doctors, lawyers, architects, accountants, professors, artisans, chefs, even bus drivers and conductors? These categories of Malays were also virtually non-existent in 1970.

The crux of the matter is that for any civilisation to progress and develop it has to undergo changes in three aspects of the mind: intellectualism, secularism and materialism. He must have the ability to ponder over his life, to earn more income for example so as to enable him to cater for him and his family better, and to have the initiative and creativity to go about getting it.

The NEP, in other words, in reality required the Malay to undergo a massive psychological change in order to cope well and meet its challenges. It demanded a massive transformation from a closed traditional mind to an open modern one, from an ignorant mentality to a knowledgeable one. I reiterate, he should intellectualise, secularise and be materialistic. He must change.

And here's the cue. The Malay person at that time was asked to 'progress' and 'develop', but not to change. A person changes only when he is aware he is changing. If there is no such awareness, then change is thereby plastic in nature.

On looking back the Malay should have undertaken a series of intellectual, secular and material transformations, some of which are listed below:

- He should have modernised his thinking as he would be living in a more urban surrounding. But he did not change his mental focus to suit the modern urban surrounding. So much so that there developed this phrase "You can take the Malay out of his kampung, but you cannot take the kampung out of him".
- He was deeply involved in a fiercely competitive economy based on mass production. He should have undergone a period of apprenticeship before he faced the cruel world out there. He should learn to modernise on an even playing field, not on one tailored for him.
- He should have embraced democracy more solidly. Democracy means the rule of the people by the people and for the people and much more. It has other provisos, like people's participation in the governing process, the rule of law, checks and balances, justice being done and seen to be done. As we know democracy in this country boils down to the general election conducted every four or five years. After that it's all autocracy.
- He should develop transparency in any economic, management and governing endeavour, followed by accountability, responsibility, and constant two-way communication. Right now the government operates in secrecy supported by draconian Acts (e.g. the OSA, ISA).

Instead the Malay had championed other elements, namely race, religion, and culture in facing the NEP challenge. The Malay had rewritten the formula for economic development; with disastrous results. The Malay did not do well in economic sustainability. Malay businesses went bankrupt, even Malay tycoons went under. The economy suffered. It became stagnant, and the people fractured.

Other unintended consequences followed. The judiciary fell into disrepute, the non-Malays marginalised, good talents migrated and the FDI dried up.

New approach

Najib's NEM should have all these factored into his policy cauldron. He must give more respect and attention to the Malay intellectual infrastructure in order to have better chances for sustainability.

Here's my suggestion: emulate the paths and the examples of advanced countries.

The peoples in the developed countries are highly educated. They are highly literate, civic minded, well read, and open to fresh new ideas, especially the good ideas that will motivate them to accept change.

Mainly these countries are tops in the ranking for human rights. Their peoples enjoy the freedom of the individual to seek their own happiness. They walk and talk in the way they wish, wear any gear that would suit them in any particular situation, marry anyone they so wish, and embrace any religion they find suitable for their soul.

Transparency International ranked Malaysia at 56 in 2009 having dropped from 47 in 2008 and 23 in 1995. What we should do is then to do things to re-secure our 1995 ranking and if possible better it!

Malaysia's world ranking for judicial independence for the period 2009-2010 was 52, compared with Thailand 54, Taiwan 49 and Singapore 19. Can we not go for number 18?



For education, in the QS university ranking our premier university i.e. Universiti Malaya, has disappeared from the top 200.

Other comparative statistics abound and generally Malaysia seem to be in the middle rung, but on a downwards sliding pattern. We should arrest the downward slide, and aim to go for the top thirty. It's not an impossible thing to do, for many countries who were our equals in economic fundamentals not too long ago like South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore are on the top rung of these

lists.

Open minded individuals

Najib seemed aware of this. Indeed he said an open-minded attitude (i.e. intellectualise, secularise, and be materialistic) was necessary at a time when the government had to brave challenges to successfully implement the NEP.

"This open-mindedness is not restricted to the Aidilfitri open house but encompasses also the thinking and methodology suitable to the times," he said at the Aidilfitri celebration of the Prime Minister's Department in Putrajaya.

Would he advise the generic Malay people to do the same to ensure the sustainability of NEM? He should. If he does and is successful, maybe he need not be a philosopher after all. Instead he'd be hailed as a great leader.

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