



**Conquer fear?
Yes, we can
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In rolling out the Economic Transformation Programme (ETP), encompassing a great variety of projects totaling US\$44 billion, Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak is pinning his hopes on securing an electoral victory over the opposition with impressive economic performance.

But would any economy in the world achieve transformation without deep-rooted reform? I am afraid not.

In fact, the experiences of the developed nations strongly indicate several key factors in sustainable economic growth: openness to the world economy, extensive freedom of private business, stable and efficient regulations (including well-defined property and intellectual property rights), considerable infrastructure investments, a competent, professional and honest public administration, strong commitment in human capital, as well as a vibrant civil society.

As Najib celebrates the 18th month of his government this weekend, the public is yet to hear about root-and-branch reforms in the judiciary, police, bureaucracy, press and media and, of course, the political sector.

Instead of feeding the people with dazzling but unrealistic figures and statistics, the government will do well to spell out concrete measures - if any - to root out corruption, improve public integrity and enhance transparency. Any attempt at China's Great Leap Forward will likely end in bitter disappointment at best and catastrophic failure at worst.

Recent developments show that the government may on one hand be trying doubly hard to prove that it does have in mind a gigantic economic pie to keep everyone satisfied, it is also seeking to tighten up control over the public on the other.

Of late, there has been a series of blatant assaults on voices and views that do not go down well with the powers-that-be, the latest casualties being Zunar, the popular cartoonist who was briefly detained last week, and Kim Quek, whose title *The March To Putrajaya* is now officially banned. The government's weird and desperate acts have got Zunar and many wondering if one, under Najib's 1Malaysia, now needs a licence even to laugh.

Umno's politicking is so intense and its attacks so profane that they have prompted one Hata Wahari to brave the potential reprisal by urging both the government and the top management of Utusan Malaysia to stop exploiting the Malay daily as a political tool.

Nearly five decades to the year when the once progressive Malay nationalist newspaper was forcibly taken over by Umno amid much public outcry and protest, a conscientious voice that resembles that of the fearless Said Zahari is finally heard, however feeble it may sound.

Writing already on the wall

Like it or not, the end of the Barisan Nasional era is nigh. Even if it does not happen at the



next general election, the writing is already on the wall. The strange emergence of Perkasa cannot be more ominous. In failing to distance itself from the ultra-Malay group, Umno is alienating non-Malays, with the MCA, MIC and Gerakan being among those hit by collateral damage.

Even moderate and fair-minded Malays will be alarmed by the incivility pervasive among Perkasa members, whose abusive language and vulgarity have outdone Namewee's poor taste. Both Perkasa and Namewee can now go back conceited, safe in the knowledge that they have strengthened their respective support bases.

All this is part and parcel of Umno's cunning plan to strike great fears in the public, for no authoritarian government will take defeat lying down, especially when so much vested interest is at stake.

Knowing that all the dodgy deals and mega scandals have widened the trust deficit between the people and itself, the BN government has no option but to do its utmost to ensure minimal punishment at the ballot box, hence the paradoxical combination of economic hopes and political fears.

Whether the oft-used tactic will work is dependent on us. Malaysians must remember our dreams will be blocked or even shattered if we allow our fear to grow bigger than our faith in creating a peaceful and trustful society.

Fear makes strangers of people who would otherwise be friends. For years, Malaysians of all races have been frightened into thinking the other party would never understand us, so we choose not to talk directly to avoid unpleasantness. But are Malaysians really so immature in handling differences that we must constantly look to the government for guidance?

The Germans cannot have put it more succinctly: fear makes the wolf bigger than it is (*Angst macht den Wolf größer, als er ist*), so the onus is on us to reject BN's politics of intimidation and bullying. National life is nothing if it is based on fear, rather than genuine hopes and understandings.

It is either that we rise up and overcome the fear, or wait to be devoured by it. What do you think the authorities can do if thousands of people take to the streets to protest against the government's inertia in institutional reforms across the board? Put us all behind bars?

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