

Living in a fuels paradise
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The spectacular arrogance, greed, corruption and injustice of the Barisan Nasional (BN) government may have failed to fire the ire of enough Malaysians to rid the nation of this coterie of crooks and incompetents in the general election earlier this year.
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But now, even those who've been able to coolly continue backing BN for racial or other spuriously self-interested reasons are likely to start burning with resentment too.

In fact the suddenness and size of last week's hike in fuel prices could well inflame such rage in the rakyat as to prove this rotten coalition's funeral pyre. And I know a great many people who'd happily pay 10 times the going price for more petrol to pour on the blaze.

najib abdullah 100408Damp squibs like the prime minister's "God willing, I hope Malaysians will not demonstrate over this," and memories of the deputy prime minister's incendiary response to protestors against a 30 percent fuel-price rise in 2006 that "Malaysians should change their lifestyles" will do little to quench the conflagration.

A shock, overnight 40 percent rise in the retail price of petrol and 63 percent rise in the price of diesel, with more promised for August, is just too hot for most people to handle, even with sops like the road-tax rebates.

Malaysians have been living in a fuels paradise for years, of course, thanks to BN's practice of enriching its members and buying itself political mileage with the rakyat's money, much of it derived from oil and gas.

klcc towers 150306So it should have been evident to all concerned that Petronas has been a twin-towering inferno just waiting to combust. The company has operated behind such a thick smokescreen of secrecy that it rates as one of the least financially transparent and accountable oil producers in the world.

Behind this pall of secrecy, the Mahathir and Badawi governments have siphoned-off uncounted billions of ringgit for self-promoting mega-projects like the world's (formerly) tallest building and the grandiose administrative capital at Putrajaya.

And as Anil Netto reminded us in his recent article "It's a jungle out there! Oil price hike madness...", still more Petronas billions have been squandered on rescuing failing banks and keeping floundering crony capitalists afloat.

Possibly the most notorious example of the latter was the acquisition through the Petronas-owned Malaysian International Shipping Corp of Mirzan Mahathir's shipping company Konsortium Perkapalan Bhd when it was sinking under debts of RM1.7 billion.

Additionally, as Netto further recalls, power producers controlled by the families of some of Malaysia's richest individuals including Lim Goh Tong, Yeoh Tong Lay, Syed Mokhtar Al-Bukhary and Ananda Krishnan have long enjoyed wildly generous subsidies on supplies of natural gas.

And if all that wasn't the pits, Petronas money is also employed to drive events like the Monsoon Cup for millionaire mariners and the poorly-attended the Malaysian Formula One Grand Prix, as well as to support the National Philharmonic Orchestra to the tune of millions more ringgit every year.

Burn, BN, burn!

Why have Malaysians tolerated such highway robbery for so long? I guess because so many have been content to turn a blind eye to the spectacle of public officials and cronies lining their own pockets as long as Big Daddy BN was also helping pay for not only petrol, but also power and food into the bargain.

People have also apparently happily tolerated a string of broken promises that public transport will be improved with Petronas money, just as the prime minister's again pledging this time to try and justify his sharp reduction in fuel subsidies.

disabled spot check rapidkl 180407 posterBut anyone who has ever experience the convenience and economy of a genuine public transport system, as in Singapore, Hong Kong, Tokyo, London, Paris and countless other cities around the world, must be painfully aware that public transport in KL and everywhere else in Malaysia ranges from pathetic to virtually non-existent.

You'd imagine that all the parliamentarians and other officials who spend so much time, money and Petronas fuel jetting around the world on "official" jaunts would be aware of how poorly Malaysian public transport compares with that in so many other places.

But on second thoughts you wouldn't imagine any such thing, as these trippers are doubtless chauffeured around abroad in the same high style as at home, never seeing anything but five-star hotels, swanky conference venues, VVIP parties and designer shops, and never demeaning themselves by rubbing shoulders with the peasantry on buses or trains.

Something else the government never seems to see, or at least have anybody prosecuted for, is the smuggling of tanker-loads of subsidised Malaysian fuel to offshore 'customers'. And it can't seem to come up with a coherent plan to stop motorists from Singapore and Thailand from filling-up at Malaysia's expense.

In fact there seems to be very little that the government is capable of doing, let alone doing it efficiently, transparently and cost-effectively, beyond hatching schemes to enrich its members and their families and friends.

Just a glimpse of government profligacy has been provided by the prime minister's announcement that RM2 billion will be saved by measures including stopping the hire of non-essential employees, reducing spending on asset acquisition, confining training and other meetings to non-hotel venues and restricting cabinet members' all-expenses-paid annual family holidays to seven days at Asean and local destinations, though still not putting a limit on total cost.

budget 2006 public transportIt's time that more Malaysians realised that it's not just fuel subsidies that the nation can no longer afford, but the whole system of institutionalised plunder and waste by the BN regime.

This kleptocratic coalition has been on its last legs since it barely managed to steal the March 8 general election.

So the global explosion in oil prices could prove a blessing in disguise - it could spark the blaze that finally puts and end to BN and cremates the remains.

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