

Fortress Penang
Malaysiakini.com
Jul 24, 2008
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The furiously swirling political currents and eddies keep throwing up ironies of a rich order tied to the past. Take 1969 for instance.
MCPX

penang global city centre 170907 buildingsThe newly born in Penang Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia Party attracted large crowds wherever it held public rallies. Just curiosity, said the political pundits. No, said the electorate at the ballot box and, Penang fell to the Opposition.

A first for a West Coast State.

The MCA which was the cock of the walk there since independence was shattered. Its 12 year old hold on the state had passed in a blink of an eye.

Now, the Gerakan's was a slow motion long blink but still a blink - 39 years in fact. The party was crushed.

The first Chief Minister, Wong Pow Nee, a teacher was Penang born as was his successor Dr Lim Chong Eu.

O, horror of horrors, the current holder of the office is a rank outsider - the DAP secretary-general Lim Guan Eng representing the Pakatan Rakyat - and is from Malacca.

However, the mitigating factor is both were Straits Settlements, along with Singapore. It was confidently predicted that Penangites would never take Lim, the son of the Opposition veteran, Kit Siang, to their hearts.

Although there were a few demonstrations here and there as he stumbled in his first few days in office, the general impression is that the people have accepted him.

However, the Barisan Nasional continues with its constant sniping ignoring the aspect of human beings which favours the underdog.

The biggest blow for Penang was the chopping off 80 percent of its share set aside under the 9th Malaysia Plan. In 2006 it got RM6.152 billion or six percent of a total of RM600 billion.

penang monorail 250608After the mid-term review despite the addition of RM30billion to the total allocation, Penang's share was sliced by some RM4.7 billion. So the state's part stands at RM1.452 billion or 0.6 percent of the total sum.

The two responsible for this are both anak Pulau Pinang—Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi and Second Finance Minister Nor Mohamed Yakcob.

Irony with a sharp edge, wouldn't you say?

The monorail and the outer ring road projects and repairing Penang Hill's funicular railway for the island were dropped. And Georgetown's traffic mess left behind by the previous

government is likely to remain unsolved.

'Penang Leads'

Lim Guan Eng's sharp response to the move was understandably livid. He accused the federal government of punishing Penangites. He described the cut as being no different from sabotaging the state's economy.

Then weeks later that is on July 19, it would seem compassion touched the heart of the PM with a little help from his fellow Penangite Cabinet member.

And the Federal Government is set to pour RM100 million in purchasing 200 buses for RapidPenang and RM40 million to upgrade the Penang Hill railway.

What's more work on the RM2 billion Penang Sentral bus terminal in Butterworth is expected to start early next year to be ready by 2010. Also on the cards are a 24-hour ferry service, vital to relieve the traffic burden on Penang Bridge.

And Lim earns the credit for this turn around for pestering the authorities to return Penang's allocation. It must be noted that Penangites are known for their resourcefulness. It's not for nothing that state's tagline is "Penang Leads".

Just take world squash champion Nicole David for example, she sums up their spirit.

Another earlier example was and is The Star newspaper. This is a totally local born, made in Malaysia product unlike its rival The New Straits Times (originally known as The Straits Times) which was founded and funded by the British colonial masters.

The Star started life practically as a hole in the wall operation in 1971 at a three-story shophouse building in Weld Quay. The prognosis then was six months before a predictable collapse.

Thirty-seven years later it's the premier paper and also girdles the globe through cyberspace. It's difficult to believe that that fighting spirit has deserted the state.

However, there was news to cheer Penangite hearts - the World Heritage Site listing of George Town and Malacca City by UNESCO.

Understandably it was greeted with much teeth-grinding by the Gerakan which together with the Federal Government had struggled for 12 years for that day - only to see the fruit fall to others.

Lim has asked the Federal Government for seed money of RM13 million to preserve and maintain the heritage site.

Southern Thailand

The hope is it will be granted as the whole country should celebrate the two sites recognised by the international body.

Both are expected to draw more tourist dollars with this honour; some of this money would end up in federal coffers, easing its financial burden during these hard times. So it's only

right that Putrajaya grant the request, otherwise it would reflect poorly on it.

Whatever it is, Penang should look to itself to be as economically independent as possible, starting in some small but significant ways.

For example, enhance the image of trishaw riders by making them feel important and, let artwork decorate their vehicles to make them more attractive to tourists. Encourage more bicycles on the roads to reduce the number of cars on the roads.

Perhaps too persuade and help those with interesting hobbies to turn them into lucrative businesses through e-business ventures. The BN could do well to remember that Penangites have retained trade and family links with Southern Thailand and Northern Sumatra for ages.

Why during economic bad times of the late 1980s there was serious talk of reviving the barter trade between Penang and Medan. This could be right time to revisit that idea and, perhaps draw Kedah into the venture also.

Even Perak might be stimulated into looking at what they can offer in barter trade terms. An anthropological truth is that the human brain thrives, grows and sparkles in a challenging environment.

And in the continuing pinching, poking and pasang kaki that the BN is indulging in prompted by their losses, is creating such an environment for the opposition which the ruling coalition is bound to regret later. penang world heritage town 140708 03

It's becoming more than obvious that the electorate delivered a deep wound, so deep the BN is finding difficulty in healing. Itself.

But taking that frustration out on the opposition is regressing to Neanderthal times. They just won't work in this day and age, they just end up antagonising the public.

Anyway what's happening now is that the federal government through its actions is fueling parochialism. That word emits a bad odour. Unfairly I say. Parochialism is actually a good thing being the muscle and sinew of patriotism as it were.

Just look around you. Our football clubs at the local level before ascending to the state level, where selected footballers don state colours and finally to graduate to representing the nation.

The same applies to other sports as well as politics. The federal government on its own is nothing; everything comes from the states, including the federal leadership. Even the Federal Territories had to be carved out from state lands.

Oil and gas addiction

With that off the chest, back to the main story. When the Gerakan first took Penang, the island part of it had an Achilles heel that Kuala Lumpur exploited – its free port status.

abdullah ahmad badawi govt announce new petrol price increase 040608 07Item by item that was dismantled until the Gerakan had to join the enlarged version of the Alliance, the BN.

Now, it's very obvious that Putrajaya is doing all it can to maintain the BN influence in the

various Pakatan-controlled states through its funding and appointment of officials of various bodies including those normally under the purview of the states.

This move has the potential to backfire badly on the ruling coalition.

Already an exasperated Selangor Menteri Besar Khalid Ibrahim has declared his intention of taking the matter to court if the Federal Government does not cease and desist this attempt at mischief making.

Then along comes another revelation that's pregnant with significance.

Petroleum Nasional (Petronas) president and chief executive officer Mohd Hassan Merican country states we are too dependent on the oil and gas. A more appropriate description would be addiction.

He was reported as saying that that sector provides more than 50% of the government's revenue. This is alone is a shocking record of BN's economic stewardship of the nation.

Hassan sounded the warning that this was very dangerous for the country to be so heavily dependent on finite resources like oil and gas. His other damning observation was even though the country had seen billions in foreign investment in setting up of factories yet their contributions to the nation could not be seen.

pas pkr dap stadium melawati shah alam 310308 01He also pointed out that foreign workers are on the payroll of most of these factories. Hassan was doubtful if the nation could survive in the long term under such conditions.

In other words, the country has been partying in a fool's paradise. That, as the powers-that-be was wallowing in an orgy of self-adulation.

So, what's vision 2020 all about? Really. That darn pagar had been at it all this time in our history.

Oh, yes, come to think of it, there's a saying from the bible which reads: "Those who are exalted shall be humbled, and those who are humbled shall be exalted."

Very relevant to these turbulent times don't you agree?

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