

No second chance as standards fall
Malaysiakini.com
Oct 7, 2009
David KL Quek

A recent survey of Global Broadband Quality by Oxford University's Said Business School has dealt yet another blow to Malaysia's fledgling pursuits to be a world-beater.

While Malaysia aspires to and continues to talk about its cyberspace prowess and ICT leadership, this does not appear to have been translated into reality.

Loud proclamations have been made about our multimedia super corridor and our multi-billion ringgit initiatives at creating more content and first world infrastructure for web-based applications to bring us smack into the ICT-enabled global stage.

But Malaysia has done far worse than expected, emerging 48th out of 66 countries surveyed. And to think that we jumpstarted our ICT ingress as far back as in 1996, when the world's Internet age was just being born.

What happened in between now appears inconsequential. We appear not to have advanced as much as we could have done. If only we had had that little extra edge, that little more drive, perhaps a greater determination to excel and to exceed...

Most of us are oblivious as to where we truly stand. We appear to have been locked within a time capsule of our own self-congratulatory image that everything is hunky-dory and well, acceptably 'perfect'.

We seem to think that we just need to dream, to start something and all would have been well. But we appear to have forgotten to work towards real gains. We have just marked time, or so it seems.

We appear to have taken small baby steps of tokenism as if these would be sufficient in this dog-eat-dog competitive world. Clearly, this is not enough.

Instead, the harsh reality is one of decrepit decay, which many of us are beginning to suspect and dread with some blush, some despair even. Where have we gone wrong? Why is this happening? Aren't we Malaysians supposed to be world-beaters who *boleh* (can do it)?

Well, apparently this has now been glaringly exposed when more independent surveys show us for what we are, warts and all. We should not kid ourselves any longer. We often pride ourselves far and above the underdeveloped basket cases of failed nations - we brandish a façade of a somewhat confident middle-income Asian tiger, well on our way to a fully developed status. Wawasan 2020 and all that. But, as a young child would ask, "are we there yet?"

This broadband 'laggedness' exposes and demolishes the much vaunted efficiency and productivity beliefs that are so ingrained in our parochial psyche, especially those within the establishment.

Importantly, it sadly reflects the common practices and administration of our bloated and often reality-disconnected civil service, right up to our senior managers, directors and policy makers.

So much so that the administration's own self-importance and its narrowly circumscribed remit allow policy makers and shapers, the warm glow of self-satisfied feel-good complacency -well-meaning, but sadly not insightful and cocooned in a mediocre mindset.

While it cannot be denied that we have had some excellent and highly-capable administrators, there are probably many others who do not come up to scratch. Worse, many of the better officers are weighed down by inept and underachieving subordinates whose levels of competence are sadly, just not good enough. Perhaps there have been other considerations, other administrative or political wastage and leakages.

This broadband quality survey should be seen in the context with other similar surveys, which had earlier put our tertiary educational facilities and universities right through the middling rungs of world academia, where we seemed to have slid further down the slope of prestige and standards.

Time and again, we have with disbelief and child-like tantrums, scrambled for some vindication, some rationale as to why we have fared so passably below par.

Painful statistics

But wait, the bad news is not over yet. The most recent UN Development Programme's Human Development Report 2008 has ambiguously placed us as the 66th nation in livability, out of 182 nations.

We were third best within Asean after Singapore (23th) and Brunei (30th). Other Asian countries ranked as having "very high human development" are Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea, Kuwait, Qatar and the UAE.

Malaysia is ranked as a 'high human development' nation, lumped together with other nations such as Romania, Costa Rica, Mexico, Cuba, Hungary, Bahrain, Russia, Saudi Arabia and Lebanon. This dubious rank is three rungs down from the 2007 report, when we were in 63rd position - yet another drop from our middling position and not much to crow or gloat about.

Malaysia's life expectancy was estimated at 74.1 years, compared with Japan's 82.7 years. Our literacy rate was 91.2 percent, compared with Indonesia's 92 percent, and Georgia at 100 percent.

Our GDP per capita was US\$13,518 (RM46,495), comparable to Botswana's US\$13,604 but way below the highest, i.e. Liechtenstein's US\$85,382.

Singapore's life expectancy was estimated at 80.2 years, its literacy rate was 94.4 percent and GDP per capita was US\$49,704.

But such modest rankings of indices and so-so perceptions from outside bodies and authorities are not benign. They hurt. Because, they form the bases from which ultimate decision makers rely on, to decide who they can trust to work with, which nation to invest in, or where to usefully establish more productive enterprises with the best returns and with the best potential for reciprocal interchangeable benefits - i.e. win-win experiences for all parties.

Malaysia is sadly but surely losing that competitive edge. We may already have lost all that attractive package, which has endeared the world to our carefully constructed cultural

diversity, our 'veneered' unity, our possibly skin-deep charm even.

Rebuild foundations

Sadly, once again we have to rework our image, dented as it continues to be by our own lackadaisical approach to nation building. Like encrusted barnacles on a sunken *Titanic*, we have allowed entrenched racism, partisan politics and lacklustre administration to corrode the very foundations of our beloved nation.

We have allowed corrupt practices, patronage rent-seeking politically-connected business practices, slanted laws, misguided policing and an expedient judiciary, to fester like termites gnawing and eating into the very innards of our society and nation, so much so that we have become emaciated from within, with less and less 'glow' to show for it!

We have inadvertently suppressed our better instincts, our collective innovativeness, by imposing artificial armoured-glass ceilings. We have allowed our homegrown talents, our creative ideas to fritter, indeed to fly away, despite our occasional head-start - we just have not sustained our momentum of excellence. We have acknowledged that we seem to possess a third-world mentality when it comes to maintenance or even achievement.

We allow petty insular considerations to cloud our preference for the best, accepting in its stead, pedestrian or second-rate choices which ultimately lead to less than stellar outcomes, sacrificing excellence at the altar of timorous ethnocentric prejudice.

We chauvinistically accept the fallacy of the Peter Principle where we continue to promote poorer less-qualified candidates to all levels of management and administration, which clearly showcase their limited capacity and thus their truncated heights of self-actualisation and personal achievement.

Shortsighted venal interests and political expediencies seem to soar way above all other interests. It is said that Malaysians now place 'race, religion and nation' in that sad order of importance.

It is time to recognise that these entrenched outlooks are not simply protecting our narrowly circumscribed political turf (Umno/Barisan Nasional), our ethnic supremacy (Malays), or our arrogant supercilious pride (Chinese).

We cannot simply latch on to craftily reworded jingoistic unity of purpose, 1Malaysia notwithstanding. We have to learn to live it and truly accept one another: all our strengths and weaknesses, and harness our collective wisdom and vigor. Mere tolerance and token lip service is no longer enough.

Our debilitating conflict-ridden core values must be seen for what they really are; they must be laid to rest as mindfully as we can. They are certainly not benign and have now come home to roost. Our divided nationhood is as glaringly disruptive as it continues to cast its ominous fractured shadows.

Sustained ineptness and unlearned mistakes will be punished more and more with our globally connected world. Our ICT-empowered and enlightened global audience, including our more and more vocal and freshly enfranchised citizens, will ensure that this will no longer be acceptable or tolerated.

There may be no second chance. Wake up Malaysians, before we languish further and fall

into the ranks of failed nations!

DR DAVID KL QUEK is president of the Malaysian Medical Association.

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Source : <http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/114369>