

**Taib, we are not anti-rich but anti-corruption**  
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SARAWAK chief minister Abdul Taib Mahmud is wrong when he says that certain politicians were attempting to win the support of Sarawakians with their "anti-rich people" politics and their criticism of successful enterprises. Taib's mistake is to confuse "anti-rich" with "anti-corruption".

Is it difficult for Taib to grasp that people are against corruption?

Corruption threatens the ability to govern well. It inhibits proper development, it extinguishes the democratic process and it discourages fair business practices.

Obviously Taib resides in a world far removed from the one we live in. Corruption has infiltrated just about every institution in our country – politics, police, judiciary, the civil service, business, sporting fixtures, corporate bodies, defence contracts, immigration. The list is extensive.

At the ground-breaking ceremony for the opening of a road project near Miri, Taib said, "There is no such thing as a very thriving economy without businessmen and entrepreneurs". He is right.

However, may we remind Taib that businesses, especially the more lucrative ones need permits, leases and possibly, work permits for key personnel, to function and operate.

Only those companies with political patronage are likely to succeed. When leases need to be extended, companies which don't accede to various "requests" are dropped. It is a vicious circle.

Taib also said that the progress which the state enjoyed would have been impossible without responsible corporate leaders willing to invest in projects with slow returns. Again, he is right.

However, the same argument holds true for the small-time businessman. Only fools enter business thinking that they will be rich overnight, without investing both time and money. Commitment, determination and planning are essential. Even a smallholding farmer needs a few years before his rubber trees can be tapped or his oil palm can be harvested.

Taib was again right when he said that entrepreneurs had successfully diversified Sarawak's economy from those based on natural resources into a new range of industries like plantations and the service industry.

And of course, he is correct that these "keep people in employment and provide other business opportunities".

But could he be referring to himself and how he has successfully recycled his business interests?

The state-sanctioned large-scale logging and exploitation of timber in the seventies and eighties resulted in the large scale deforestation of Sarawak. Indigenous peoples were displaced. There was indiscriminate destruction of the equatorial rainforest in the name of

progress.

Then when the valuable timber ran out, Taib was alleged to have gone into "Plan B".

Companies with links to him are alleged to have converted their logging concessions into large-scale planting of oil-palm or acacia plantations. This resulted in the loss of biodiversity, pollution of the waterways and threatened the fragile tropical top-soil.

It is alleged too that his ownership of certain companies prop up other industries. For instance, a major cement company in Sarawak supplies material to the construction of dams, buildings, roads and bridges. So yes, Taib is right, other business opportunities are made available.

Then we have the SCORE project which is allegedly going to improve the lives of the Sarawak people. Billions are poured into this development but at what cost?

For the indigenous people, taking their land away is like robbing them of life. Plants like padi, medicinal plants, sago and fruit trees once provided them with sources of food or sustenance. Valuable aromatic woods and cash crops were once exchanged for cash.

The problem is compounded when companies plant crops, not for food but for conversion into bio-fuels.

Without the jungle, animals which are a valuable source of protein, migrate deeper into the interior. For the indigenous people, their local retail shop or supermarket equivalent, a place where they source essential supplies, is destroyed.

Taib's contention that his government had a policy of guiding and encouraging entrepreneurship, just like the federal government, is not altogether incorrect.

However, projects are not open to tender but a company is usually awarded the contract. This company then pockets the difference, often totaling millions of ringgit, after it has put that particular job out to tender. In essence, the job is sub-contracted to the lowest bidder. So much for encouraging entrepreneurship.

During Taib's rule, Sarawak, arguably the richest Malaysian state, has been stripped of its wealth.

Instead of channeling the monies to improve the lives of its people, Taib has channeled the wealth to build his own empire both at home and abroad.

It would be true to say as a result of his policies, the indigenous people have to migrate into the urban areas looking for jobs and food. This is where their lack of skills and education creates further hardship as they cannot compete with urban dwellers.

Taib is the entrepreneur extraordinaire. He is adept at recycling his economic activities.

The land is recycled – first timber, then mono-crop plantations and also demarcation of cleared areas into industrial sites. His dams use cement from his cement manufacturing company. With reduced oil and gas reserves, he turns to green alternatives but it is baffling that he considers coal mining as "green".

He is skilled at re-inventing himself.

However, the same cannot be said about the indigenous peoples. Having suffered the loss of their lands and their ancestral way of life, they lose their dignity when they descend into a spiral of poverty and destitution. Many turn to drugs, drink, prostitution and crime.

People, including certain politicians, are not "anti-rich"; They are "anti-corruption".

Taib could prove us wrong and emulate the following people: Bill Gates donated much of his fortune to improve health and fight poverty in poor countries; Warren Buffet agreed to match Gates's donations and only lives on a salary; J. Paul Getty left his fortune to the Getty art museum; Anita Roddick of Body Shop fame left her fortune to charity.

Taib need not look beyond his shores. There are enough poor people there who could benefit from his altruism. Money may not buy him love but it could certainly make a lot of people happy and bring progress to Sarawak.

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