



NEP Benefitted All Malaysians

While proponents of the New Economic Policy say a revival is necessary, detractors are quick to point out that any attempts to resurrect the Malay agenda would be futile. But the point to remember is that it had benefitted every layer of society regardless of race.

FOR A non-election year event, delegates, observers and the media people attending last month's Umno annual general assembly at the Putra World Trade Centre (PWTC) in Kuala Lumpur got more than what they could have possibly bargained for.

It was spiced up before and during the three-day session by a series of startling events – from the Wanita Chief Datuk Seri Paduka Rafidah Aziz invoking God and then bursting into tears over allegations that she was rude to Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad to the controversy over approved permits (APs) for the importation of cars.

Then, there was the sudden unpegging of the ringgit hours after China floated its yuan, despite earlier pronouncements that Malaysia would act independently.

Rafidah, according to a front-page report in *The Star* newspaper, had sworn by the Quran, something that Islamic scholars generally discourage, that she had nothing to do with any of the AP holders.

That saved Rafidah from being criticised or questioned by the women's wing, but not from the scathing attacks by many delegates at the assembly proper who blamed her for failing to supervise the issuance of the permits, resulting in the creation of what is now known as the AP kings, and for allegedly being rude to the former Prime Minister.

Dr Mahathir, in his capacity as adviser to the national car project, Proton, had questioned the issuance of the permits and the values at which the imported cars are being valued, which he said were unbelievably low and posed a threat to Proton cars.

After weeks of see-sawing between making and not making public the list of the AP recipients as demanded by Dr Mahathir and a host of other interested parties, the Prime Minister's Office shocked the public by releasing the list just days before the assembly.

The action was widely praised as further reflecting Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's seriousness in pursuing transparency and accountability.

Keeping a watchful eye

HAVING exposed the identities of the kings, princes and princesses of the APs, and subjected them to the ire of the public and the delegates of the annual assembly, Abdullah cannot now leave the matter unresolved.

Clearly something is amiss when so few have received so much and for so long. While some of the recipients have attempted to explain their extreme good fortune, a few prominent ones have chosen to remain conspicuously silent.

One of these *lembu suci* – delegate Ahmad Shabery Cheek's Bahasa Malaysia version of 'sacred cow' – is reputed to own two French-made Dauphin helicopters and is said to be a relative of an important Umno figure.

Rafidah herself has remained defiant, declaring angrily to the Press that she would not resign, and was quoted by the *New Sunday Times* at the end of the assembly as saying: 'An English newspaper described those with APs as AP kings. I'm being made to feel like the AP queen.'

Rafidah might have chosen to humour the Press but, having known her since 1976, I must say that she is better than a queen. She is an empress dowager. For a good two decades, she was one of the most trusted ministers in Dr Mahathir's Cabinet. Where she is today is because Dr Mahathir gave her the freedom to run the ministry the way she saw it fit.

But Rafidah could have overplayed her cards. She could very well be facing the worst challenge in her career. Her defiance may have undermined her leadership of the movement and her continued stewardship of the ministry.

Already, the controversy has affected the standing of

the *Wanita* at the assembly when it opted to remain silent on the AP issue.

While a top official of the ministry had publicly accepted responsibility for the issuance of the permits, neither Rafidah nor the Government can wash their hands of the controversy.

Clearly, there has been a long-term failure to monitor and supervise this billion-ringgit licensing business.

Reviving the NEP

WHETHER debating the AP issue, money politics or the lack of progress of the Malays, one recurring theme at the assembly, including in the presidential address, was *pemantauan*.

The very first thing the Prime Minister must *pantau* (monitor) is the effect of the public sector five-day working week on the productivity of the economy.

There was a consensus that much of the failure of the New Economic Policy (NEP) programmes and projects was caused by the deterioration of the monitoring system. This is particularly obvious following the economic crisis of the mid-1980s when several key instruments of the policy were either abandoned or held in abeyance in order to hasten the recovery. These included the Industrial Coordination Act (ICA) that empowered the government to monitor and direct Bumiputera equity and employment in the private sector. Without the ICA, the ability of the government and the administrative system to effectively monitor share ownership, employment and the business activities of private sector companies was automatically reduced.

This was made worse by the downgrading of such monitoring mechanisms as the Implementation and Coordination Unit (ICU) and the Socio-Economic Research Unit (SERU).

At the same time, there was a growing reticence among civil servants and the preoccupation of some Umno leaders with their own business and career interest.

Thus, if Umno and the Malays are serious about reviving the objectives of the NEP and adopting a new national development agenda as was so passionately implored by Umno Youth through its deputy chief Khairy Jamaluddin, then the Malay-dominated civil service and political systems must prove not only to the Malays but also to all Malaysians that they are serious.

Social justice

FOR a while, there clearly was some resistance among the Umno elite and the Malay-led civil service to the idea of reviving the NEP and resurrecting the Malay agenda.

Invoking such jargons as globalisation, liberalisation and meritocracy, they argued that any attempt to

resurrect the Malay agenda would be futile and was bound to fail.

But bombarded by impeccable statistics and analyses from some of the country's best economic brains, it dawned upon them that the Malays and other Bumiputeras had, in fact, drifted back to nearly where they were at the start of the NEP in 1970.

Thus, it is most encouraging that young Umno leaders like Khairy and Noraini Ahmad, the Puteri chief – the sons and daughters of the NEP – had chosen to make a stand on the policy and on the Malay agenda.

I hope they are totally and whole-heartedly converted and committed to the principle of social justice that no national development policy is complete and tenable without the interest of the majority – in Malaysia's case the Bumiputeras – being addressed and taken care of.

The Prime Minister reiterated that no apology was needed for the government to revive the NEP's objectives and sternly warned the Chinese Press not to

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'communalise' the issue.

I don't think the non-Bumiputeras are against improving the lot of the Bumiputeras. On the contrary, the enlargement of the economic pie under the NEP was due to a large measure to the rise in the purchasing power of the Bumiputeras.

Inertia

DESPITE the comparatively modest improvement of the Bumiputera economy, the Bumiputeras are today the most voracious consumers.

More Malays filled the Melawati Stadium in Shah Alam, Selangor, to watch *Akademi Fantasia* than to attend the Umno assembly. They were certainly happier and more relaxed than Umno delegates were at PWTC hours earlier.

So, the owner of the UK-based Astro, Mr T Ananda Krishnan, should be happy that, thanks to the improved Bumiputera purchasing power, he can sell his Astro Ria satellite channel and get the Malays hooked on his *Akademi*

Fantasia reality show.

In addition to this, these carefree Malays happily spend millions of ringgit on *Afundi* (SMS voting for the show) and on a variety of *Akademi Fantasia*-related merchandise being regularly promoted on Astro's channels.

The same goes to other non-Bumiputera tycoons and conglomerates that are finding the Malays an easy target for their sales campaigns and promotions.

Yet, when it comes to complaining about the *lembu suci* and the *anak emas* (favoured sons), Umno leaders and delegates conveniently forget about these non-Bumiputera tycoons who have been given independent power producer (IPP) licences, gaming franchises, the privatisation of race courses and billions of ringgit of capital injection by Khazanah Nasional.

No wonder, many commentators – past and present – have made some very disparaging remarks about the Malays. Abdullah in his closing speech quoted a 19th Century *munsyi* (teacher), Munshi Abdullah, as saying: '*Kita ini melihat orang Melayu semakin lama semakin bodoh*' (We see the Malays becoming growingly foolish with the passage of time).

Such a damning indictment, coming as it did from Munshi Abdullah, was not surprising. He was a Melaka-born Arab married to a Tamil woman. He chronicled the daily lives of the Malays at the time when Melaka was in decline.

Taking the bull by the horns

THUS, I sincerely hope that the Malays, as the Prime Minister put it in his opening address, are at the *persimpangan jalan* (crossroads) and not at the dead end.

Abdullah also repeated the call for the Malays to have integrity and self-esteem, to explore new economic and business activities, to be more resilient and to develop towering personalities.

But without political will and the support of a corruption-free civil service, Abdullah's multi-faceted dreams are in danger of ending up as nightmares. There is a downside to raising people's expectations too high.

Charging a handful of ageing corporate figures, politicians and corporate executives for corruption will not help rid the country of the scourge and improve the delivery system. These people have little to do with the ordinary *rakyat* and the delivery system.

But corruption, abuse of power and inefficiency among district officers, municipal council heads and officers-in-charge of police districts are having direct and dire consequences on the people. Yet, very few of these people are being brought to book.

Many delegates spoke openly and angrily about

corruption, the abuse of power and the inefficiency of the civil service. But there appears to be an unwillingness among Umno leaders to openly confront the issue.

Without a clean, efficient and trustworthy civil service, Abdullah's promise of an improved delivery system is in danger of remaining unfulfilled.

The weaker Bumiputeras and other disadvantaged Malaysians need the *tongkat* (crutches) whether they are in the form of subsidies, scholarships, study loans or preferences.

The notion that the non-Bumiputeras are without crutches or are not in need of government assistance is a fallacy. The non-Bumiputeras enjoy as much help and assistance from the government as the Bumiputeras do.

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Almost all of today's non-Bumiputera tycoons and conglomerates have either received or are still receiving government assistance. They have certainly benefitted from the huge NEP expenditures and high growth generated.

Thus, it is unfair and unproductive for Umno leaders to condemn wholesale the Malay business community for the failure of a handful.

Umno itself must be willing to do some soul-searching and self-examination. Many of the failed businessmen were the favourite sons of Umno. When they were riding high, they contributed heftily to the party.

Umno leaders, especially the younger ones, must make sure that they do not become the proverbial *ayam jantan* (cockrel) that *berkokok bertalu-talu, tetapi ekor penuh tahi*.

I will not try to give an English equivalent because the last time I did so with Khairy and Datuk Seri Dr Mohamad Khir Toyo, the Menteri Besar of *Selangor Maju* (developed Selangor), I was accused of being malicious. **mb**

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