



Of GLCs, Vision 2020 vs Siti Nurhaliza

The Prime Minister is urging Government-linked companies not to compete with Bumiputeras. The fact is, GLCs are more likely to compete with Bumiputera businesses than complement them.

WHEN attending the Bumiputera National Chamber of Commerce and Industry Conference in Kuala Lumpur last month, a senior Mara officer told me that the agency had been given the go-ahead to run a nationwide express bus service.

I was somewhat taken aback because under eight years ago, Mara Holdings Sdn Bhd privatised its express bus business to a Bumiputera company helmed by former Proton Managing Director Datuk Mohd Nadzmi Mohd Salleh.

I find the argument that Mara needs the income from the express bus business to pay for its rural bus service intriguing. If that is the case, why did it sell its express bus service to Mohd Nadzmi?

Being among the rural dwellers to benefit from Mara's rural bus service during my schooling days, I have always thought that it was part and parcel of the agency's public service.

It was not intended to be a profit-oriented venture. Even if it is operating at a loss - estimated at RM 10 million a year - the Government should consider its benefit to the rural people.

But the contradiction in Mara's move became clear when, on July 30, the *Utusan Malaysia* newspaper headlined, '*GLC jangan saingi Bumiputera - P M*.' It quoted Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi as urging government-linked companies (GLCs) not to compete with Bumiputeras.

If Abdullah is against GLCs competing with Bumiputeras, how is the Government going to justify Mara - an agency formed to help the Bumiputeras - competing with hundreds of Bumiputera transport operators?

After the controversy surrounding the issuance of Approved Permits (APs) for the importation of motorcars, in which the Cabinet appears to be in the dark, it is not unlikely that it, too, is not aware of Mara's move.

Then there is the case of bus operators not having the freedom to sell advertising space on their buses. They can do so only through a company called Media On-Wheel

which was appointed by the Commercial Vehicle Licensing Board.

One wonders under what authority does the board appoint a private company whose power is to supervise other private companies? Does it not go against the principle of free enterprise and freedom of choice?

It is unthinkable that the Government is not aware of the fact that GLCs are more likely to compete with Bumiputera entrepreneurs than complementing them. It happened in the past and it is still happening.

MEASURING UP

FOR that and other reasons, the mainstream media should not be too hasty in praising and complementing the crop of new GLC managers.

Let them be truly and thoroughly tested before we start treating them like heroes and celebrities. Already we have too many celebrity chief executive officers (CEO) in the public sector.

It is easy to take over and improve the running of well-established companies or ones that have been cleaned-up and restructured following the 1997/98 crisis.

Yet, we read in several mainstream newspapers of compliments being paid to a recently appointed CEO of a government-controlled telecommunications company despite the fact that his previous company did not do well. The media-related company has since been sold to another operator.

In one of the interviews, this new appointee said his objective was to make his new company 'the number one' in its area of operation. The media should use that as the principal element of his KPI (Key Performance Index). KPI is one of the new yardsticks the Government recently introduced to measure the performance of GLCs.

A PRICEY THANK YOU

AT a time when the *rakyat* is being forced to be thrifty

and the Government is pushing full steam ahead to balance the budget, it is disturbing that ministries and departments continue to spend lavishly on events and on thanking high officials who grace them.

In a number of recent cases, they went to a great extent to justify their actions, which were either totally senseless or insulting to the public.

It is understandable when a Menteri Besar or Chief Minister uses the state Umno Liaison Committee to buy newspaper advertisements to bid welcome to the Prime Minister and, sometimes, the Deputy Prime Minister to his state.

I am sure that the Prime Minister and his deputy do not demand that their visits be advertised in the newspapers. In any case, the government-friendly mainstream media will invariably report their comings and goings.

But some Menteri Besar and Chief Ministers may feel compelled to do so, believing it will buy them favour with their bosses.

But I can't understand why ministries and departments should spend taxpayers' money to publish advertisements thanking ministers for gracing official events. That is their responsibility. They are paid to do it.

A classic example was when the Ministry of Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs bought a newspaper advertisement to express its 'deepest gratitude' to the Prime Minister 'for graciously launching Malaysian Consumers Day 2005 through his honourable representative YAB Datuk Seri Mohd Najib Tun Abdul Razak, Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia'.

To my simple mind and at the risk of being presumptuous, I don't think either the Prime Minister or his deputy cared whether the advertisement was published or not.

I don't see why the Ministry should implicate the Prime Minister when he was not present at the function and had clearly asked his deputy to represent him.

BURDENING CONSUMERS

LOGICALLY, the Ministry should be more concerned with the fact that this year's consumer day was commemorated at a time when Malaysian consumers are faced with a string of price increases.

And whether the Ministry cares to acknowledge it or not, these upward movements in prices were triggered by the Government's decision to reduce fuel subsidies.

Since March, the Government has allowed petrol and diesel prices to be raised twice. The latest was on July 31.

Following these upward adjustments, prices of goods and services have been rising steadily. One has only to scan newspapers and magazines to read about the burden

the higher oil prices are having on the people.

The Government may have successfully reduced its burden by lowering fuel subsidies but the burden has now shifted to consumers.

In line with its caring slogan, it is imperative the Government considers lowering the income tax and consumption taxes in the forthcoming budget to compensate the *rakyat* for taking over its financial burden.

Logically, by not spending as much on fuel subsidies and earning more tax revenues from higher petrol and diesel prices, the Government should have more money to spend for the good of the people.

Thus, there is a lesser need to tax the people. Surely the great minds and the spin-doctors now walking the corridors of power are aware that without a high level of consumer spending and public sector investment, the

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economy could tailspin. Already there are forecasts that the economy will grow at a slower pace next year.

At a time when the people are having to pay more for a plate of fried noodles (*The Sun*, Aug 6) and a boat ride on the Rejang River (*The Star*, Aug 1), Ministers and top civil servants should conserve public funds.

They should stop travelling abroad unless absolutely necessary and, when they do, they shouldn't be staying at the most expensive hotels and drinking the finest wine. Above all, they should stop wasting taxpayers money to thank each other and exchange souvenirs.

They are elected by the people to do a good job and are amply rewarded for their efforts. They must not act contrary to the many lofty policies, programmes and slogans of the Government.

Surely, they do not want these ideals, ideas and slogans - the likes of transparency and accountability, integrity, towering personality and *hadhari*- to be the subject of SMS jokes.

The reduction in fuel subsidies and the rise in petroleum prices are distorting people's lives and routines. According to an ECM Libra Securities' economist (*The Star*, Aug 4), fuel subsidy cuts could impede economic growth in the short term.

According to *Utusan Malaysia* (Aug 8), the Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs Ministry expected prices of 255 more items to go up.

If the Ipoh City Council's stance is mind boggling to the town's disgruntled residents, what do they have to say about Tan Sri Mohd Isa Abdul Samad who continues to hang on to his post as Minister of Federal Territory despite having been suspended six years from Umno for money politics?

Then there is the poser on whether the Government will reduce the pump prices of petroleum products if and when the price of crude petroleum falls.

Instead of congratulating each other at the expense of the *rakyat*, ministries and departments should do more to ensure that price increases are reasonable and justifiable by closely monitoring prices at all levels - from the manufacturers to the retailers.

And they should stop mocking the people by arguing that prices of petrol and diesel have to be raised to discourage smuggling. This is as good as saying, 'Hear ye, hear ye, the good people of Malaysia. You have to pay higher prices for petrol and diesel because our cheap petrol and diesel are being smuggled out of the country.'

No caring government will make its people pay more for the inefficiency and, possibly, the corruption of its law enforcement agencies, and for the inefficiency of its neighbours.

So, in the spirit of Merdeka, let us free ourselves of unnecessary bureaucracy and protocol, from reciting lengthy honorific titles and pleasantries, to self-praise and self-glorification.

WHERE IS THE TRUTH?

THEN there were reports that Ipoh residents had described as mind-boggling the decision of their city council to allow the head of its landscape department, Zulkifli Redzuan, to continue in the job despite being charged with three counts of corruption. He has claim trial.

The Star reported the Mayor, Datuk Hasan Nawawi Abdul Rahman, as saying that the council's disciplinary board had the discretion to allow Zulkifli to continue working on grounds that the latter was innocent until proven guilty. He later said allowing Zulkifli to work saved the council money. The council finally bowed down to pressure and suspended him.

If the Ipoh City Council's stance is mind boggling to the town's disgruntled residents, what do they have to say about Tan Sri Mohd Isa Abdul Samad who continues to hang on to his post as Minister of Federal Territory despite having been suspended six years from Umno for money politics?

At the time of writing, Mohd Isa remains a minister while waiting for the party's Appeal Board to consider his appeal. With that, a history of sorts has been made. Since his expulsion from Umno on June 24, Mohd Isa sits on

the Cabinet as an independent Member of Parliament.

On the other hand, Datuk S Sothinathan of the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) and MP for Teluk Kemang was promptly relieved of his post as Deputy Minister of Environment and Natural Resources for speaking against the Barisan Nasional in Parliament over the plight of Malaysian students, mostly Indians, at the Crimean Medical College, whose accreditation was withdrawn by the Public Services Department.

It would appear that you are more likely to get a second chance if you abuse your power or are involved in money politics than for speaking up in defence of your constituents.

VISION 2020 VS SITI NURHALIZA

IN a talk at a Universiti Sains Malaysia seminar in Penang on Aug 2 on the role of the media in promoting Vision 2020, I made, among others, the following points:

- I The media had played an important role in publicising the policy and there is a need to analyse the progress of the vision more critically given the changes in the domestic and global environment, in particular since the devastating 1997/98 economic crisis;
- I Whereas it requires continuous annual real economic growth of 7% from 1991 to achieve the target of developed nation status by the year 2020, our economy has grown by an average of only 3.41% since 1999;
- I Media reports and official statements did not sufficiently address the nine challenges of the vision; and,
- I The chances of accelerating economic growth to meet the visions' deadline should be brighter if the promised revitalisation of the New Economic Policy (NEP) objectives made at last month's Umno General Assembly is carried out.

Interestingly, none of these was reported. Instead, my light-hearted comment on singer Siti Nurhaliza Tarudin and the mysterious 'Datuk K' became the headline.

Clearly to the popular Press, Vision 2020 is dud compared to Siti Nurhaliza or, for that matter, the just-concluded Astro's *Akademi Fantasia Three*. mb

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