



A Lucky Lot We Are, But...

Just into its 48th year of independence, Malaysia has shown that it is a blessed country to live in. Now, if only we could change the irksome way we do certain things.

SCANNING newspaper headlines these days and remembering the 48th anniversary of our independence, I realise just how lucky I am. I think you do too.

The haze has taken its toll. We are warned that it may come back. But the sore throat and sneezing we suffer are nothing compared to the hunger in Africa, the floods in India and wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Our inflation rate is rising and the growth of our economy is slowing down. We are not making much money from the moribund stock market and mutual funds. The Employees Provident Fund dividends are barely sufficient to offset price increases.

But our economic woes are nothing compared to what the poor souls are experiencing in many financially bankrupt countries around the world. It is, in fact, good to have these little problems and worries. They keep us awake and challenge our capacity to think and to act. They even make us feel just how lucky we are.

Thank God that we are not International Trade and Industry Minister Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz, the fugitive leader of the Sky Kingdom Ayah Pin, or the AP (Approved Permit) kings.

In these last few months, being powerful, wealthy and well-connected is not necessarily a plus point. But what is a little inconvenience when you have made millions hogging your influence and selling the APs.

Thanks to the heated exchanges between the former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Rafidah on the AP issue, we are once again reminded that being powerful, wealthy and influential is not protection enough.

Like the proverbial *tupai* (squirrel) that falls to the ground despite its aerial agility - *sepandai-pandai tupai melompat akhirnya jatuh ke tanah juga* - we too become the victims of our follies.

Hazy days and hazy actions

THE haze is a good example. We had experienced it before. We learnt many lessons and took many correct steps. Then the haze went away and, in the great Malaysian way, we forgot all about it.

So when the haze came back, we spent quite a number of days wondering what to do. We swiftly blamed Indonesia and played down the fact that our own peat forests and plantations were burning, although not as bad as in Sumatra.

Instead of acting swiftly to put out the fire and explaining what the authorities are doing, we have Selangor Menteri Besar, Datuk Seri Dr Mohamad Khir Toyo, praising Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi for informing him of a forest fire in the state (*Utusan Malaysia*, Aug 15).

I have nothing against Mohamad Khir or anybody praising the Prime Minister for any good deed he does. But that is not the point.

The point is, why is it always somebody else who has to point out to Mohamad Khir the wrong things that are happening in his state? Prior to the haze, we had the indiscriminate felling of the forest in Shah Alam.

It is not the Prime Minister's job to go around spotting fires and informing Menteri Besar and Chief Ministers.

Of course, we appreciate his effort in telephoning Mohamad Khir to inform him of the blaze. The right way is for the Selangor Menteri Besar to be informing the Prime Minister of the fires and the actions taken to put them out.

I am being brutal because Mohamad Khir is persistent about wanting to declare Selangor *Negeri Maju* (Developed State), against the advice of many.

What happened to our planning capacity?

WE have to stop acting in a knee-jerk manner. We were once well-known for putting in place some of the best long-term policies and plans, the New Economic Policy (NEP) and the long term Outline Perspective Plan among them.

But in recent years, we seemed to have lost our touch. So it comes as no surprise that in the case of the haze, and possibly other emergency situations, we tend to be very *ad hoc* in our response.

Take cloud-seeding, for instance. We resorted to it only when the haze nearly choked us to death and our reservoirs and irrigation dams were almost dry.

Why can't we make cloud-seeding a continuous undertaking? And since the Government has almost completely privatised water supply, the task of ensuring that the lakes and reservoirs are well stocked should be the responsibility of the concession-holders. They should be the ones carrying out cloud-seeding.

Being in the tropics, we have precipitation all year round. That means we can carry out cloud-seeding on a daily basis if we want to. We do not have to wait for the reservoirs and irrigation dams to run dry before we employ this simple, cost-effective technology.

It does not speak well of a caring government when, in the midst of the haze and rising consumer prices, the people are told that they should expect water rationing and padi farmers are warned that they may not be able to work their fields in the coming season because the dams are running dry.

We cannot keep telling the people just how lucky they are by pointing to the fact that fuel prices in Malaysia are cheaper than in Thailand or the United States. We are not Thais or Americans. We are Malaysians.

When monopolies take precedence

THERE is no doubt that we have benefited from the Malaysia Incorporated policy. The close cooperation between the Government and the private sector has led to a robust economy.

But we must make a distinction between ordinary business undertakings and government-sanctioned monopolies. These include toll highways, water supply, electricity generation, broadcasting and telecommunications.

It endears neither the Government

nor the monopolies to the *rakyat* to have the likes of Works Minister Datuk Seri S Samy Vellu spooking the people with news of impending toll rate increases.

It does not help to convince the people that the Government cares about them when ministers appear to be more concerned about the welfare of these monopolies than the well-being of the people.

Enough of telling the people about the billions the Government is spending to subsidise them. In all likelihood, it is the people who are subsidising each other through their economic activities and the taxes they pay the Government.

The rice farmers, for instance, are being subsidised by rice consumers who pay higher domestic prices for rice. The list goes on.

In a democratic country, the wealth of the nation belongs to the people. The Government owes its existence to the people and not vice versa.

So ministers and their retinue of public servants and advisors should stop talking about the Government's burden. They should be talking about the burden of the people.

The ultimate burden of the Government is to remove or lessen the burden of the people. Otherwise, how can it claim to be the government of the people?

WHY FOCUS ON RAFIDAH ONLY?

PUNDITS would like to believe that as a result of the AP controversy, Rafidah's days are numbered and the Prime Minister will soon reshuffle the Cabinet.

While it is the Prime Minister's prerogative to reshuffle the Cabinet, the pundits should not be too hasty to discount the possibility of Rafidah surviving the crisis.

Whatever one thinks or says about Rafidah, she is not only the longest-serving Umno minister but is one of the most capable.

Thus, it is surprising that she has not only become entangled in the AP issue but also seems to be unable to satisfactorily extricate herself from it.

The recent stance of the Cabinet does not make life easier for her. It was not satisfied with her explanation and took away responsibility for the AP issue and the more crucial National Automotive Policy from her ministry.

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The AP policy is not new. It was adopted to help Bumiputeras break into a sector monopolised by non-Bumiputeras. It has always been a bone of contention but there was nothing until now to suspect that it was subject to gross manipulation.

Even in the ongoing controversy, the sudden increase in the number of permits issued and the concentration of recipients seemed to have happened only in the last two or three years. The truth may yet take some time to surface.

Surely the Prime Minister wants to know if this happened during his tenure or was in fact carried over from the previous administration.

Whatever the case is, removing Rafidah alone may not be the answer. If the July Umno General Assembly was any indication, Rafidah was not the only person loathed by the delegates.

There were other targets - ranging from the Cabinet to the civil service, the government-linked companies (GLCs) and the Umno-controlled media organisations.

Removing Rafidah alone would satisfy neither Umno nor the people. In fact it may lead to allegations that the leadership is being selective in delivering punishment.

So we can sympathise with the Prime Minister for the monumental task he is facing in strengthening his foothold and, more so, in ensuring that his promises to the people are delivered.

He needs more than luck. He needs experienced and sincere people to assist him. If that means reshuffling the Cabinet, the civil service, the kitchen cabinet and the GLCs, he must have the courage to do so. We wish him luck.

It is for the same reason that we applauded him for setting up the International Advisory Panel comprising such luminaries as NEP pioneer, Norwegian Tan Sri Just Faarland. He needs the widest possible view to lead Malaysia in this rapidly globalising environment.

VILIFYING THE CELL PHONE

THE ongoing debate on the pros and cons of registering cellular phone prepaid subscribers reminds me of a report published in a recent issue of *Harper's* magazine

It concerns a survey done last year by a Nigerian newspaper, the *Daily Times*, that asked people whether they believed that answering cellphone calls from certain

'killernumbers' causes bleeding and death.

One respondent said: 'I think it is true. They mentioned in our church that a woman died at Oshodi. They said she collapsed after receiving a call. Maybe some people have gone into research to develop charms that suck blood through the phone. What we must do is to develop our own counter attack. For me as a member of the OPC (a vigilante gang in Lagos), I have gotten some protection for myself, and I don't care if anyone calls me with the so-called killer number.'

There are no killer numbers in Malaysia. But admittedly some of the SMS messages being sent and forwarded these days could kill the political careers of some unfortunate souls.

So our authorities, like the Nigerian vigilante member, developed their counter attack. They insisted that prepaid cardholders be duly registered. The belief is that this would enable 'big brother' to snoop on them.

It seems that fear and loathing of technology are a global phenomenon. In the United Kingdom after the July 7 terrorist bombings, there were suggestions that the use of cellular phones on trains and buses be banned.

This brings to mind yet another technology bashing story. When households in my village in Kedah started to buy radios back in the fifties, the *tok guru* (religious teacher) issued a *afatwa* (ruling) that listening to the radio was *haram* (forbidden).

That did not stop the *tok guru's* wife and other village women from coming to our house to request my mother to tune to the *lagu mengaji*. They had confused Arabic songs with the recital of the Quran.

And while we are grateful to the Malaysian Trade Commissioner to Papua New Guinea, Datuk S H Foo, for spending RM10,000 to save a tiger cub from the cooking pot, I wonder why little is said about the restaurant in Rompin, Pahang that possessed the animal?

My rudimentary understanding of the wildlife laws suggests that we don't have to pay a single sen to rescue a protected species. That is the work of the Wildlife and National Parks Department (Perhilitan). Something is amiss. **mb**

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