

# Let us forge together to develop our tanahair

IT is obvious that there is no real consensus on how the country's economic wealth has been distributed, judging from the debate on the New Economic Policy over the past week.

The Government has maintained that the NEP target of 30% bumiputra corporate equity ownership has not been achieved, saying its estimate as stated in the Ninth Malaysia Plan is only 18.8%.

The Prime Minister said the report by the Asian Strategy and Leadership Institute (Asli) was wrong as it was based on incorrect information.

Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said the information used by the Economic Planning Unit involved 600,000 companies. Asli, on the other hand, reportedly gathered its information from a sample of 1,000 companies listed on Bursa Malaysia.

The Prime Minister reiterated that government-linked companies (GLCs) are not bumiputra companies as the profits were given to the Treasury and the funds used for the people and country.

Asli had reported that the estimated amount of bumiputra equity ownership was 45% of the RM715.4bil worth of stocks and had thus exceeded the target of 30%.

The think-tank, in its report, *Corporate Equity Distribution: Past Trends and Future Policy*, estimated that 70% ownership of GLCs was attributable to bumiputras.

The NEP, born after the 1969 racial riots, is aimed at eradicating poverty and restructuring society. Under the 9MP, the achievement of the 30% target has been revised to the year 2020.

The Asli report has come under fire from some businessmen and academics, who point to the high level of poverty among bumiputras and their lack of representation in business and professional occupations.

The debate, if conducted in a rational and non-communal approach, is good for the nation as all Malaysians would want to see the NEP succeed.

No one in his right mind would challenge the intention of the NEP as it seeks to bring about a more balanced society.

The eradication of poverty and the creation of a bumiputra middle-class are essential but certainly Malaysia must find out why after 37 years of the NEP, the rural mass has not reaped the benefits of the country's success.

So much public funds have gone into restructuring and poverty-eradication programmes but the targets are still not achieved. If funds are not properly utilised, an important question is how to plug the leaks.



**On The Beat**

By WONG CHUN WAI

Academics, using the class framework in their thesis, have blamed this situation on the powerful elite. It is the politicians and businessmen, with their connections, who have benefited the most from the NEP, while the status of the working class has remained much the same.

For example, the predominantly Malay taxi drivers still have to rent their vehicles and work long hours to earn a decent salary, while Chinese traders must depend on their hard work and savings to survive in hard times. They have no connections and certainly they are not part of the corporate equity.

The question for ordinary Malaysians is: Why should the wealthy, for example, get discounts for expensive houses or golf club memberships? Rightly or wrongly, they blame the politicians for perpetuating the continued ethnic divisions for their own expediency.

For some academics, the question of corporate equity, regardless of the percentage, remains very much in the hands of the rich, whether they are Malays, Chinese or Indians.

The "haves" and "have-nots" are not peculiar to any one race but include all racial groups; and that is a fact.

While we cannot escape from the reality of the country's ethnic-based political structure, we can still conduct a thorough reappraisal of our policies to meet the challenges of a fast-changing world and to ensure the NEP's success.

There has to be a meeting point somewhere. It is good for the country to have a solid Malay middle class as well as educated, confident and successful Malay entrepreneurs. It is imperative that the bumiputras are made to feel secure that their political and economic rights are intact.

Pak Lah must be commended for ensuring that the Indian community will own at least 3% of total national wealth under the 9MP. In fact, the sizeable community, which has lagged behind, deserves more. This would ultimately lead to the partnership of the Malaysian team.

And while there are negative connotations to the Ali-Baba business venture, it is not necessarily bad.

Why shouldn't a Chinese businessman have a Malay partner and vice-versa? Why must a Chinese businessman be excluded to favour a Singaporean businessman, for example, because a foreign partner - instead of a Malaysian Chinese or Indian - may make the clinching of a deal easier?

For the non-Malays, they should also be assured that they continue to have a stake in the national economy and not get the perception that government regulations have blocked them.

Their participation in the civil service, universities, police and army is essential and good for the nation, just as a bigger participation of bumiputras in the private sector is important.

Likewise, if the GLCs, which are funded by the public, are wrongly regarded as bumiputra-owned, it is simply because they are almost headed entirely by Malay bumiputras.

Such perceptions and insecurities are real and Abdullah, as the leader of all Malaysians, must understand the fears, concerns and frustrations of all Malaysians.

He has been patient and willing to listen to the views of every group and I, for one, certainly have faith in the Prime Minister. Malaysians believe he is a fair man.

Make no mistake about it. A dynamic business community is essential, to drive the country's economy as protectionist walls are torn down in the international market.

If Malaysia wants to compete with the emerging economies in the region, we need to loosen up our rules and not impose more rules on ourselves.

The Chinese business community with their links to China and the Malay businessmen with Islamic ties to the Middle East are advantages that we should emphasise.

To ensure that Malaysia still has a pie to share, Malaysians must hold their hands tightly together to ensure we do not lose out on opportunities in the global community.

There is little point in fighting over the crumbs if the economic cake is not enlarged and certainly no community should be made to feel that they are losing out at the expense of another community.

A Malaysian approach, with a more universal appeal, is certainly needed if we wish to forge national unity and to make everyone feel that they are not being left out as we develop our one and only *tanahair*.

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