

The Making of the Ninth Malaysia Plan (9MP)

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THE details of the Ninth Malaysia Plan, tabled in Parliament today, are mapped out over 559 pages, less than the previous plan, and presented unlike previous plans that had followed the same format since the beginning of Malaysia as an independent nation.

Times have changed; the challenges of today's world are not the same as that of the past; hence, there had to be new sectors to look at, new strategies to achieve success in these sectors.

It was a plan that was more than one year in the making, with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi playing the role of chief architect and chief co-ordinator.

From the beginning, in huddled sessions with his deputy Datuk Seri Najib Razak, Second Finance Minister Tan Sri Nor Mohamed Yakcop and the then minister in charge of economic planning Datuk Mustapa Mohamad, and later, Datuk Effendi Norwawi, Abdullah fined-tuned the broad outlines.

There were discussions with other community leaders, then brainstorming with their political leaders.

Equitable distribution, irrespective of race or religion, closing the gap between the rural and urban areas by creating new growth centres, enhancing and expanding human capital to meet new challenges, and, continuing existing and innovate new growth policies — these were the broad aims. What did they want to see achieved? A more prosperous, progressive, dynamic nation which would give its citizens a better quality of life; a nation, where polarisation was still an issue, but which would be united and lived in harmony.

That, they all agreed, was the bedrock for the nation's survival and for its progress in the face of new challenges and competition from emerging economies, from China and India, from globalisation, and from daily advancements in technology.

How would these aims be achieved, with the ultimate target being to achieve the vision set out by the previous Prime Minister, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, to make Malaysia a developed nation by 2020?

The Economic Planning Unit (EPU) played a central role, in collating statistics and throwing up ideas.

But this was too important a plan not to seek views of everyone who had a stake in the country and, since last year, Abdullah has been meeting political and community leaders, academics and civil servants, think-tanks, unionists and NGOs, religious groups, intellectuals and thinkers from within the country and abroad, and economic planners. His enthusiasm was infectious; as were his concerns that this was a defining moment for Malaysia and if there was no strategic planning, then the people who would pay the price would be the next generation of Malaysians.

To reflect the gravity and magnitude of the task ahead, he called it a "National Mission". From the beginning of the year, he cancelled all overseas trips, reduced his numerous domestic

engagements, and spent time going over the details with his Cabinet colleagues and senior officials.

Figures were checked and re-checked; new ideas and views kept being proffered; the useful ones were embraced, and then, came the task of putting all this together.

All views were considered and relayed to the EPU; many of these views are incorporated in those 559 pages. They all, now, have a share in the Ninth Malaysia Plan. Thus, they all have ownership and it is truly, a national mission.

In the run-up to the 9MP, in the last three months, the administration has made some very tough decisions, like biting the bullet and raising fuel prices, though it may not be too popular because increasing prices never is fashionable; rationalising the domestic aviation sector to ensure both Malaysia Airlines and AirAsia, not only survive but excel and compete with other regional and international airlines; and formulating the National Automotive Policy (NAP) to boost the domestic automotive industry and targeting to do away with Approved Permits, something that one generation of Malaysians had grown up to think was a permanent feature etched in stone.

The message is emerging — that Malaysia cannot afford to continue depending on subsidies because it makes us less competitive, because it takes away funds which can be used for developing schools, infrastructure and hospitals which will take the country forward and ultimately, benefit everyone even more; that efficiency will be the key to competing and meeting the new challenges the country faces; that we have to change mindsets and think first world if we want to become first world; and that when there is equitable distribution of the country's wealth and equitable growth across geographical borders and states within the country, it will be the underpinning factor in strengthening unity and harmony among our diverse ethnic and religious community.

It has been 15 months of intensive planning; but if all the objectives of the 9MP are achieved, if the implementers do not allow indolence to get in the way, then every second of those 15 months for everyone involved would have been worth it.

Source: NST | www.nst.com.my