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Tough tests for Najib's new Bumi pragmatism

A SIGNIFICANT pit stop in Datuk Seri Najib Razak's tour in expounding his new socio-economic vision is entering one dragon lair after another to explain his bold moves to augment the Malay/Bumiputera status and wealth, from poverty to corporate ownership to overall success in all fields. The people from these dragon lairs gave him tough love but also thumbs up to his vision.

In hindsight, dealing with the likes of PKR, DAP and Pas was a breeze than it is to appease to the fire-breathing demands of Perkasa chief Datuk Ibrahim All, who brandished his device to gauge Malays sons of soil grit: a "real deal" Malay who is incorruptible, has true Malay spirit, transparent and wields power.

Except for the 30 per cent conundrum and charges that the PM was backtracking from the Malay/Bumiputera agenda in launching the Bumiputera Agenda Steering Unit (Teraju) this week as the key cog to push the Malay/Bumiputera cause in the New Economic Model, Najib eased into Perkasa's scheme of things.

Otherwise, Ibrahim would not have enthusiastically backed Teraju, praising the new outfit as "being in line" with a resolution passed by the Malay Consultative Council Bumiputera economic round table.

But Ibrahim has a bigger ambition for Teraju: make it as powerful as Pemandu, the driver of the Government's Economic Transformation Programme, and convert the Bumiputera Economic Agenda as THE national economic agenda.

That's where the PM's balancing act gets complicated. After he launched Teraju, his far-reaching New Economic Model wasn't well received by DAP publicity chief Tony Pua, who railed that Najib was abandoning the NEM's ideals and programmes.

It's schizophrenic situation: how to grapple with the paradox of the two hectorings, one from his natural foe, the DAP, and the other from a precociously in-house objector, Perkasa.

Despite the testiness of the indictments, they are nowhere near the



all-encompassing ideals Najib had in mind. Granted, every move he negotiates is shadowed with hawked precision, the motive being to put the spotlight on his missteps and dormancy but even for an engaging PM as he is, the hectorings are straight-jacketing him even before he has a chance to fail.

The earnest plan in his ambitious Economic Transformation Programme is to fundamentally boost the nation's economy, maintain prosperity, create new wealth and build a New Wave workforce unaffected by traditions of the past.

At the same time, he has to guarantee that the ETP holds down inflation and crushes mental inertia. Too bad that he has to confront an opposition determined to poke holes in the plan, even if he succeeds in bringing the much-needed economic realignment.

Najib has had help: he gets a fillip from the New Economic Policy and the New Development Policy in that their execution in over 40 years have slashed absolute poverty that also helped eradicate destitution and ignorance.

But the two plans produced an unlikely side effect — urban poverty as Malays and non-Malays, too, struggle to endure the high cost of living and working in urban and suburban areas, especially Kuala Lumpur.

The NEM has a strategy to defuse all round urban poverty, in particular households earning less than RM1,500 a month, a segment Najib is solidly more focused on than the crowd living off the 30 per cent entitlement game.

Nevertheless, the 30 per cent conundrum is clearly outlined in the 10th Malaysia Plan, accepted and approved by Parliament, so there is no question of the government blowing it away.

The NEM details programmes of

the 30 per cent issue through special vehicles (Equinias, Perbadanan Usahawan Nasional Berhad and Yayasan Hartanah Bumiputera). In a nutshell, it's a done deal.

There's no question of Najib caving in to Perkasa as implied by National Economic Advisory Council member Datuk Dr Zainal Aznam Mohd Yusof after an altercation with Perkasa on the 30 per cent conundrum.

Najib doesn't see it the way Perkasa and Zainal Aznam does. The PM has at least been consistent in dealing with affirmative action to help the people who really need it while phasing out the low renters.

Najib knows the government cannot stick to "traditional" ways that have encouraged abuses, hence adoption of a new, more pragmatic approach.

As it rears its enigmatic head again, the 30 per cent conundrum that rabidly consumed the Malaysian psyche for a good 40 years is NOT a key Teraju emphasis.

Teraju is gearing towards a wholesome overarching design to rally the Malay/Bumiputera troops to raise their game.

For the Malay/Bumiputera scions, the 30 per cent figure denoting their corporate keepsake, ownership and equity has been a target so exasperatingly hard to reach (18 per cent at the last count) that a different tact was needed, a practical Plan B so to speak.

At least the Malay Chamber of Commerce understands Najib's intentions. Their president, Syed Ali Alattas, is not very concerned with the 30 per cent issue. To him it is nothing to be upset about "because we have not reached that target anyway. Improving the livelihood of the bottom 40 per cent of the population is the greatest concern".

Prof Danny Quah, NEAC council member and professor of Economics at the London School Of Economics & Political Science, has been upbeat and supportive of Najib's drive to push the NEM.

"If Najib had wanted an easy way out, he could have taken it and no

one would have been surprised. He didn't. He continues along that difficult but worthwhile path," Quah wrote in a long, discursive essay back in April 2010.

Quah continued to give perspective to the NEM when he stated: "Affirmative action matters. No significant advanced country in the world gets by without affirmative action programmes of some kind — it is in human nature to take care of the weakest and most vulnerable in our society.

"So, too, for the members of council, where that bottom 40 per cent of the Malaysian population is targeted to receive significant help and attention. But fixing all the other problems matters, too: it's one big push for all of them."

It comes back to the steely-eyed focus Najib has on what needs to be done for the country. If his momentum before had been building up, it is now so unstoppable that it unnerves his harshest opponents and critics.

And that's the rub. If he succeeds and it looks like he's getting there, it's a political booster that plays into Najib's ability to spearhead the future.

The opposition knows this too well. Their gains of March 2008 have been exposed as what it really is: a well-orchestrated fluke stemming from the viral side effects of an ineffectual and resented administration.

The resurgence of the ruling party's fortunes in the 22 months since Najib took over has spooked the opposition into conjuring tawdry tactics to impede him.

To avoid a political massacre in the next national polls, their mantra is that Najib must not be allowed to accomplish his pragmatic economic mission even if the PM capitulates to his critics every demand, proposal and suggestion.

The key subtlety to Najib's effort is to be as fair and as equitable as possible to all ethnic groups jostling for a handsome cut of the economic pie. Less obsession with the 30 per cent conundrum, more focus on raising everyone's economic grit.