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Are we achieving Vision 2020?

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With three years to go, there are some major challenges ahead if we are going to meet the targets.

It is sometimes disheartening to see the spat between Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak and Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad. Nevertheless, when a sitting Prime Minister is attacked, regardless by whom, of course he would react. What we see today is unavoidable.

There are some instances that require us to put aside our feelings about the spat. Vision 2020 is one of them. Despite the spat, Vision 2020 remains our national agenda.

Najib himself has not dismissed Vision 2020. Just a few months ago, Najib was quoted saying, "A lot of people asked about Vision 2020. The Government has put in place numerous programmes and the framework for us to achieve what we have aimed for. This includes the 11th Malaysia Plan and National Transformation Policy, aimed at ensuring that our country attains developed nation status in the year 2020. There is no issue about this and I want to stress that we are working according to schedule."

Vision 2020 sets nine challenges. They are, in summary: establishing a united Bangsa Malaysia, creating a developed society, fostering a democratic society, establishing an ethical society, establishing a liberal society, establishing a scientific society, establishing a caring society, ensuring economic justice and establishing a competitive economy.

The drafting of the Vision is largely credited to the leadership of the late Tan Sri Noordin Sopiee. He made crucial contributions when he was Director-General of the Institute for Strategic and International Studies.

Today, quite a few people are questioning if we are still on track to achieve Vision 2020. I, too, have serious concerns.

When our research team looked into the issue, those concerns were confirmed. We found that the Economic Planning Unit, under the Prime Minister's Department, has said that the average income per person has fallen by as much as 15% from US\$10,345 in 2013 to US\$8,821 in 2016. To be a high-income nation by 2020, our gross national income per capita (GNI) must be US\$15,000. This means we must double our GNI in just three years. This is almost impossible.

IDEAS issued a statement on this, in which our research director Ali Salman said, "When our GNI was US\$10,345 in 2013, the goal was realistic but challenging. Now it will be extremely difficult and with 2020 being just three years away we simply cannot afford to drop further down."

One of the main reasons behind the drop in GNI is the currency depreciation that we suffered. The main lesson here is that we must stop giving excuses about the depreciation, and fix the situation so that our ringgit does

not fall further.

Various people have commented on this matter. There are junior commentators who become childishly emotional, failing to see that critical voices are valuable contributions to push the country forward.

I hesitate to entertain them because there are so many out there who try a bit too hard to seek attention from their paymasters. Hopefully, given time and opportunity, these beginners will mature into adults, and then we can take them more seriously.

It is the comments by more worthy experts that worry me. For example, I asked Professor Dr Jomo Kwame Sundaram what he thinks. Dr Jomo hardly needs an introduction. He has held various posts at the international level, and he is now the holder of the Tun Hussein Onn Chair at none other than ISIS.

I asked Dr Jomo if he thinks we are en route to creating a united Malaysia and a robust economy by 2020. Let me quote him directly here.

On creating a united Malaysia, Dr Jomo said we are "off track because of the ethno-populist nature of the Barisan Nasional and its peninsular (and Sabahan) component parties".

On creating a robust economy, he said we are "off track as we grossly understate the denominator. We pretend we have one or two million migrant workers although the minister says 6.7 million".

He added that the recent depreciation of the ringgit by one third, which was not helped by the 1MDB scandal, has greatly diminished the numerator as well.

We do have some big challenges that need resolving. We should conduct open conversations about this. From my experience, there are many people in government who welcome critical comments positively. We should all ramp up efforts to stop the country from getting even more off track, and everyone should contribute ideas where they can.

For starters, I think it would be helpful if the Government ensures that we are consistent when introducing or implementing policies affecting businesses. The Government has said they want the private sector to be the engine of growth.

Thus, hurdles preventing them from becoming the engine of growth should be removed. Otherwise businesses will never be able to play their role to help us make the economic leap by 2020.

Wan Saiful Wan Jan is chief executive of the Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs (www.ideas.org.my). The views expressed here are entirely the writer's own.