

## **Urbanisation of the political landscape**

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### **BUDGETING FOR THE FUTURE: Malaysia's more urban demographic has made managing the nation's success a more challenging task**

WITHOUT doubt, the 2013 Budget, unveiled on Friday, touched virtually every Malaysian -- the young and the old, the poor and the middle-income group.

But what is more telling is the challenge confronting policymakers in formulating this, and subsequent budgets, given the arduous task of managing Malaysia as a successful nation.

Rising population, accelerated urbanisation and rapid rural-urban migration have reshaped Malaysia's demographic profile, as well as people's needs and lifestyles. These factors are having a huge impact on the political landscape and government policies.

Undoubtedly, Malaysia is fast emerging as an urban society. When we gained independence in 1957, only 11 per cent of Malaysians lived in urban areas. This had risen sharply to 34 per cent in 1980 and 72 per cent last year.

As such, there is pressing demand for better jobs, shelter, schools and efficient public transport in cities.

Supply of affordable housing has not been able to match the ever-increasing demand from ordinary households in the Klang Valley. Houses offered by some private developers are too expensive. The rising cost of living and tight disposable incomes are also taking a heavy toll on them. Data suggests that about 70 per cent of those living in urban areas are struggling to make ends meet.

Another issue is urban deprivation. It is a much greater challenge in meeting the aspirations of the relatively deprived in the urban areas than in managing the rural poor.

The government's capacity in dealing with urban deprivation is quite limited unless the community at large provides the necessary support, too. We don't want certain precincts of our cities to be turned into ghettos where drug addiction and other social ills are prevalent.

We are in the next phase of urbanisation, where we should aim for a better quality of life for the people.

The process of urban transformation is inevitable. This has to move in tandem with improving people's welfare through better shelter, health, education, security and environmental protection. Economic wellbeing alone is not enough.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak has made it abundantly clear in his Budget speech, the last before the next general election, that government spending should also be skewed towards addressing the demanding needs of urban dwellers.

He dwelt at great length on a multitude of people's touch points, including making cities safer places to live, building more affordable homes for the lower- and middle-income groups, putting some limit on excessive property speculation and adding more stage buses in the main cities.

Besides the bricks and mortar issues, politicians will also have to face a new reality of the changing mindset of voters with the advent of new media, broadband, smartphones and tablet computers.

The next general election will be decided, to a certain extent, by how well political parties engage and win over urban voters, some of whom are first-time voters.

So far, there has been a big thumbs up from around the nation for the 2013 Budget. This should provide strong goodwill for Barisan Nasional going into the elections.

For Najib, who is banking on his three-year "transformation" agenda and feel good factors for the polls, Friday's budget speech appeared to reinforce his plan to win a strong mandate.

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