

By being a Dr M apologist, Wong Tack is on the wrong track
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COMMENT | I read with gobsmacked amazement that “environmental activist” Wong Tack, the DAP candidate for Bentong in the last general election, is looking forward to Pakatan Harapan leader Dr Mahathir Mohamad’s visit there.

Instead of pushing the green agenda that he said would be his responsibility, he seems more concerned to stress that “Mahathir is popular not only among rural Malays, but also has admirers among the Chinese.”

In a *Free Malaysia Today* report, he even went as far as to apologise for Mahathir on behalf of all Chinese Malaysians:

“A lot of people think the Chinese are upset with Mahathir...That is not true.

“The Chinese are very practical, business-minded people. During Mahathir’s rule, there might have been a few people who were oppressed, but at the same time all the businesses were doing well...

“They can accept some corruption as long as everyone lives prosperously together and those in power don’t steal it all.”

I will leave out his penetrating sociological thesis about the inner soul and character of the Chinese Malaysians (even though I hold a PhD in Sociology).

As a Chinese Malaysian, I find such homespun theses downright unacceptable. It would take another article to rebut Wong Tack’s bold statement that the Chinese Malaysians support Mahathir (*photo*).

As a leader in the civil rights movement of the Chinese associations, I have written many books concerning the Chinese community’s revulsion against Mahathir’s implementation of the New Economic Policy, his education and cultural policies. Wong Tack could refer to these.

Here, I prefer to gauge his views on Mahathir's environmentally unfriendly record from 1981 to 2003, which he does not seem too concerned about.

Does Wong not know that it was during Mahathir's reign that some of the worst environmentally disastrous projects were executed? He might want to consult "The Malaysian Civil Rights Movement" published by SIRD in 2005.

Dr M's environmentally unfriendly record

After Mahathir took over as prime minister in 1981, he embarked on several monstrous economic projects and privatisation policies which adversely affected indigenous peoples and other marginalised communities.

These included dams, airports, golf courses, highways, plantations, townships, logging concessions and industrial plants. In most of these cases, compensation was hardly adequate but most significantly, scant regard was paid to the victims' living conditions and environment around them.

Mahathir even proposed a "Highlands Highway" to link all the highland resorts and to cut through the peninsula's highland spine, but this hare-brained idea was thankfully defeated.

In 1983, residents at Papan in Perak protested against dump sites for radioactive waste from a nearby factory, Asian Rare Earth Sdn Bhd, being built near their community.

This company was jointly owned by a Japanese corporation, Mitsubishi Chemicals and two Malaysian concerns, the Pilgrims Management Fund (LUTH) and BEH Minerals. Mitsubishi Chemicals had a similar plant in Japan, but it had to shut down because it failed to comply with environmental standards there.

The protests were successful, but the government ordered the relocation of the proposed dumps to Bukit Merah in 1985. The protests continued in the locality and the residents also took the case to the High Court. During the mass arrests in October 1987, activists and lawyers involved in the case were detained without trial under the ISA.

The indigenous peoples invariably found themselves victims of so-called "development" during the 1980s. Already in 1979, 13 Jahai Orang Asli communities had been moved to RPS Banun in northern Perak to make way for the Temenggor dam. This entailed uprooting them from their traditional customary land and diminishing their resource base.

The Bakun dam project was also given the go-ahead after Mahathir came into power.

Environmentalists and NGOs opposed this monstrous project because it would have a generating capacity of 2400MW when the energy needs for the whole of Sarawak was less than 200MW at the time.

There were protests against this project throughout much of the 1980s by NGOs and indigenous peoples, whose ancestral lands were to be drowned by the dam. They also protested against the proposed highly-polluting aluminium smelting plant to be built in Bintulu to consume energy from the Bakun hydroelectric power dam.

Although the project had to be abandoned during the recession of the mid-1980s, at least two NGO activists were arrested and detained without trial under ISA during Ops Lalang.

Among those arrested under the ISA were plantation workers who worked on the Sarawak Land Development Board (SLDB) plantation at Sungai Tengit, near Miri. Iban workers at the SLDB plantations in the Bukit Peninjau area had carried out strike actions against the massive cuts in pay and management had sought to evict them from their houses on the estate.

During the 1980s, the indiscriminate logging of Sarawak's rainforests also led thousands of indigenous peoples in Sarawak to form human blockades across logging roads in order to stop the destruction of their traditional lands by timber companies.

Penans were the worst affected because they rely on hunting and gathering the fruits of the rainforests although the Iban, Kayan, Kenyah, Kelabit and other groups were also affected. The logging further caused soil erosion which damaged their lands, polluted their water supplies, depleted their food sources and led to outbreak of diseases.

At the root of these problems was the fact that the government had refused to recognise the customary land rights of the indigenous peoples of Malaysia. These are their basic civil rights which are protected by state law. Instead, a new forest law has made it illegal to erect blockades in any logging concession.

Solidarity with the victims

Thus, instead of soiling his reputation as a green warrior by showing off Mahathir, the “father of environmentally disastrous projects,” Wong should invite all the victims to Bentong instead, so that the voters will know that he is indeed concerned about sustainable development.

These include the people who were affected by the Papan, Bukit Merah, Bakun Dam, the Selangor Dam, the destruction of plantation communities, the deforestation in Sarawak and Sabah, and all other disastrous projects and activities carried out during Mahathir’s tenure.

Or, if Wong prefers to invite personalities who are associated with the long record of environmental protection in Malaysia, could I suggest Gurmit Singh?

But please Wong Tack, don’t stray to the wrong track just to protect your political career.

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