



Asian Strategy & Leadership Institute
Dedicated To Creating A Better Society

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Be fair to all to achieve prosperity

PRIME Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad after a fruitful visit to South Korea expressed wonder over how the latter has managed to overtake Malaysia in economic growth and reduce its poverty gap. South Korea was behind Malaysia in the 1960s.

Now, the PM hopes the new economic policy, Shared Prosperity Vision (SPV), can help overcome our comparative weaknesses of slow growth and increasing income disparity. He also expressed his worries that the growing disparity between the rich and poor in Malaysia is race-based.

The New Economic Policy (NEP) was supposed to overcome these weaknesses over the last 50 years after it was introduced in 1970, but sadly we have not fully realised our national aspirations.

Why have we been less successful? It's mainly because in implementing the NEP, we executed our economic growth and anti-poverty policies on mostly race-based considerations. Although we aimed for the eradication of poverty regardless of race, this vital principle was neglected gradually over time.

Some deep state elements over-emphasised race and religion and a subsidy attitude that eventually led to the present dependency syndrome. As our frank PM stated in his monthly address to civil serv-

ants on Dec 2, "if they (the poor) were to just rely on monetary aid from the government, they will remain poor."

But we can't blame the poor alone. The easy and popular route was adopted to please the poor in the short run, often for political expediency. This unhealthy and debilitating trend was enhanced in the past, especially before national and state elections, so what could we expect?

On the other hand, those who did not benefit much from the NEP policies had to struggle harder to raise their incomes. This led to relatively less income disparities among themselves, and this is what I believe the PM is trying to achieve under the SPV for the period 2020 to 2030 for all Malaysians.

This differential treatment based on race caused immense strain on national unity in almost all fields of socioeconomic activities. Many poor Malays, bumiputera and, of course, non-Malays have borne the burden of the unfair allocation of economic and educational opportunities.

Many of the poor of all races and religions have felt being left out and alienated due to perceived and real practices of unfair discrimination in the award of basic needs like housing, health, land for cultivation, permits, licences, scholarships and promotions in the civil service.

Thus, we have deep unhappiness and disunity and often racial and religious resentment!

That is why we also have the wasteful brain drain that is slowing down our economic growth due to the loss of talent and our reduced capacity to compete internationally.

Nevertheless, despite our weaknesses, we have done reasonably well so far as, thank God, we are blessed with natural resources. But these assets are depleting, hence we won't be able to progress much further unless we learn from our mistakes of the past!

So how do we make the SPV successful?

Firstly, we must all regard ourselves as Malaysians first and foremost. The government must recognise that we should help the poor regardless of race or religion. This will strengthen national unity and peace and harmony, which are the fundamental prerequisites for progress.

We don't have to be so preoccupied with race and religion. Concentrate on a more basic needs approach instead. All the poor, regardless of race or religion, should feel included and not excluded, deprived or alienated in our beloved country. We should act as one family where we all help and advise each other to progress.

The PM's request for civil servants to advise and guide the poor

should be extended to all true Malaysians and not only to civil servants. We all should fulfil our dutiful role in society.

Secondly, equal opportunities and even special opportunities should be given to the bottom 60% of our population, especially in education and other basic needs.

Our education system has to be reviewed, revised and refined constantly to cater for the new challenges of the digital age.

If we are slow to provide better educational opportunities especially to the poorest of the poor, then we will not enable them to raise their incomes and improve their welfare however much we may want to advise and guide them!

Better quality education is the key to reducing the poverty gap, as our PM would have noticed in South Korea and indeed in all advanced countries. Hence, we need to give greater priority to improving the quality of our education, otherwise the SPV will fail to bridge the poverty gap!

If the government lacks adequate resources, the private sector, like in many advanced countries, should be encouraged to set up endowment funds to harness the wealth of the rich and famous to help narrow the poverty gap.


And why not? Some tax incentives will go a long way in enticing the rich to support education!

The government of new Malaysia has to be different and show the difference for all Malaysians and the world to see. The SPV must aim to make Malaysia a model of a united multiracial country that is modern in its policies and practices and intolerant of racialism and religious bigotry and inefficiencies and mediocrity. We have to strive harder for quality in every sphere or we'll slowly fade away!

Our PM is right in saying that the poor must also help themselves to get out of poverty. But they cannot do much on their own, so we must be more empathetic and ask ourselves how much more can they help themselves to break the vicious circle of poverty.

The government must therefore provide more facilities, educational opportunities and fair policies to all deserving poor Malaysians. But the giving must be based on basic needs and not on race, otherwise the SPV despite its noble aspirations will, like the NEP, sadly fall short of our people's expectations.

So let's move forward together as one Malaysia to bridge the poverty gap for the progress of all Malaysians!


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