

MP SPEAKS | Poverty, corruption still major issues after 65 years of Merdeka

When Pakatan Harapan took over power in 2018 we came in with hope, hope that reform will finally happen with the Harapan manifesto setting the tone for the changes to come.

While Harapan rule was shortlived and illegally disrupted by the Sheraton Move, initiated by selfish individuals for their personal gains, nonetheless I still believe that the manifesto sets the vision of how a better Malaysia can be.

“Rebuild this nation and fulfil the hopes” worked on five pillars, namely, reduce the peoples’ burden; institutional and political reforms; spur sustainable and equitable economic growth; return Sabah and Sarawak to the status accorded in the Malaysia Agreement 1963; and not least, create a Malaysia that is inclusive, moderate and respected globally.

The proposals are still worth considering but with lessons learnt - implementation will definitely require more than political will. After years of abuse and mismanagement, our institutions have continually failed the rakyat.

The government needs a leadership that has the guts to gather and engage the rakyat to bring about structural changes as well as understand the need for a paradigm shift in consciousness to be more inclusive, transparent, accountable and just.

Falling into poverty

Poverty and absolute poverty continued to haunt us and we now refer to B60s as more fall under the poverty line. After more than two years of Covid-19, the poor have seen their income squeezed even further by lower/weaker purchasing power, and stagnant wages and to top it all, prices are not coming down despite subsidies.

In 2019, the **Department of Statistics (DOSM)**, revised the national poverty line income of RM980 to RM2,208 for the poor which totals 308,699 people and RM1,169 for the absolute poor, which covers 136,923 people. This amounts to 445,622 people – almost half a million lives in poverty and barely surviving.

A poor family of four survives on RM17.80 per day per person and similarly, an absolute poor family survives on RM9.43 per day per person.

As more money is required to purchase the same basket of goods and services, there is a need to boost the income of the lower wage earners – a minimum wage of RM1,500 needs to be implemented urgently and effectively.

Yet, even the minimum wage has received unbelievable resistance and corporates are asking for staggered implementation.

While it is understandable for smaller businesses to resist, one would expect the big corporations and MNCs to lead in implementing the minimum wage.

Bills need to be paid with fair wages. For sure, the poor and hardcore poor are unable to pay even their basic expenses, such as electricity, water, children's transport and even loans for houses or cars.

Even more worrying were the four withdrawals from the EPF that resulted in RM145 billion being taken out by members. Dismally, the withdrawal as of June 30 left a total of 6.62 million members, or 52 percent of the total of 12.78 million EPF members aged under 55, with savings of less than RM10,000.

The B60 is crying out for more support as supposedly cash transfer schemes are not reaching them. Mega development projects seem to be the government's way forward, regardless of social and environmental impact.

Multiple scandals

Yet, with so much hardship faced by the people, the nation's attention was ridiculously drawn to the antics of a convicted criminal trying to overturn his conviction by abusing the judicial process and attacking members of the bench at all levels instead of focusing on the merits of his appeal.

The government had kept mum whilst this felon and his merry team of lawyers repeatedly made a mockery of the due process of the judiciary, undermined simple principles of democracy, the rule of law and the separation of powers between the executive, Parliament and the judiciary.

Billions of ringgit have been stolen and yet we witness corruption being normalised, with shocking calls for a change in the attorney-general by Umno MP Azalina Othman and a petition calling the Agong to pardon former premier Najib Abdul Razak.

To top it all, we have the scandalous Public Accounts Committee (PAC) report on the littoral combat ship (LCS) where RM6 billion was paid five years ago for naval vessels but, to date, none have been fully built and yet the company unashamedly is asking for even more funds to continue the construction of unbuilt vessels.

Sadly, for this Merdeka, poverty and corruption are still headliner issues for the rakyat but yet sidelined by the powers that be.

Despite the government's effort to save the day, with the passing of the Anti-Hopping Act, we are witnessing a weak and regressive government.

Of recent, PAS president and government backbencher Abdul Hadi Awang, set a retrogressive tone of reverting back to divisive race and religious politics, where the non-Malays were named as the cause for corruption.

It is such thinking that negates all national unity and mutual understanding efforts for all.

We also witness the return of the draconian sunset clause of the Security Offences (Special Measures) Act which allows for preventive detention and the passing of a toothless Independent Police Conduct Commission (IPCC) Act, which does not serve its purpose of being a commission with independent oversight of the police.

We also have a bill on anti-tobacco and cigarettes being introduced with heavy media publicity calling for a generation end game against smoking.

Whilst the goal of eliminating smoking is good for public health, the bill is excessively punitive against those born in the year 2007 as well as towards corporations which encroach into the civil liberties of citizens.

Included in the bill are unjustifiable harsh measures such as excessively heavy fines for corporations and individuals, and enforcers empowered, without a warrant, to enter into premises and residences, make arrests, and demand for passwords and access to digital devices.

Merdeka wish list

For this Merdeka, there is much to ask for. I certainly would like to see the following.

a. Efforts to build resilience and security for the poor.

Establish an Anti-Poverty Commission to ensure a more equitable distribution of income and resources.

End the normalising of the mismanagement of rakyat's money as these funds can be put to better use to build a more balanced and resilient social safety net scheme.

An efficient mechanism to monitor the implementation of the minimum wage of RM1,500.

b. Efforts to bring back self-respect and dignity for the poor and marginalised.

To start with, establish an effective and transparent mechanism to stabilise prices, an engagement with supply chains to help manage production costs as well as provide incentives to sectors that provide essential goods and services.

A mechanism to develop more equitable cash transfers that will reach the vulnerable and poor so as to see them through present hard economic times.

A primary healthcare system that is robust and will cater for all, regardless of status, race or colour.

Targeted subsidies, as proposed by the government, need to be more precise and can be implemented immediately. Right now a T20 household gets RM600 per month in petrol subsidies whereas a B40 household gets RM150 per month.

c. Efforts to build opportunities and inclusion.

A National Unity Commission set up to rebuild unity.

Genuine, equitable and sustainable people-oriented development that will balance economic growth, environmental care and social well-being as well as improved accessibility for all and "please no more tolled highways".

Genuine efforts to develop our local small-medium industries and enhance workers' skills, productivity and social protection to meet global challenges.

d. And lastly to rebuild democracy with more progressive political and institutional reform, such as:

Adherence to the principle of separation of powers and reinstate the integrity and reputation of a democratic Parliament, bring in changes to include a limited prime minister's term of office, bring back the Parliament Services Act, and introduce a Political Finance Act to ensure candidates and political party finances are transparent and accountable.

Reform of the executive including the police, MACC and Election Commission to bring about a more stringent check and balance system with separate, independent oversight roles.

A truly independent judiciary that delivers justice for all.

Rejection of all preventive detention laws that abuses human rights.

The list can go on to build a more robust and accountable system of governance but for Merdeka 65, I will work towards advocating my wish list.

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