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How many M'sians is enough?

WHY NOT?
By WONG SAI WAN

Planners need to study our population trends and make sure policies are in place to meet future needs – from jobs to food.

IN the 1980s, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad shocked everyone by stating a 70 million population policy so that Malaysia will be a self-sustaining market, and announced various tax incentives to encourage us to have more children.

Many snide remarks were made about the target the then prime minister set. The population then was just under 20 million.

More than 20 years on, the population has indeed grown, but not to the extent that Dr Mahathir had envisioned.

According to the 2010 Population and Housing Census final report, Malaysia's population stood at 28.3 million at the end of 2010.

This means we have grown by five million since the last census in 2000 when there were just 23.3 million of us.

This may seem to be a lot of people, but when one looks at the statistics more deeply, it becomes obvious that while our population has increased, the growth rate has slowed.

Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Tan Sri Nor Mohamed Yakcop, in releasing the final report, pointed out that the average annual population growth rate between the two censuses was just 2% .

"The rate from 1991 to 2000 was 2.6% ," he said, adding that the country's fertility rate dropped to 2.3% from 3% in 2000.

To achieve Dr Mahathir's 70 million target by 2050 would mean we have to double our rate of "making children" – but I doubt if any of us would be keen to go for that no matter how pleasurable it is supposed to be.

The truth is, more and more Malaysians, regardless of ethnic group, are settling for smaller families. This is happening all over the world, especially in countries where urbanisation is the trend.

The latest census report states that the proportion of urban population increased to 71% in 2010 from 62% in 2000.

"Apart from the Federal Territories of Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya, which are 100% urban, other states with a high urban population are Selangor and Penang, at 91.4% and 90.8%, respectively."

On the opposite end of the scale are Kelantan (42.4%), Pahang (50.5%) and Perlis (51.4%).

The census also found Selangor to be the most populated state, with 5.4 million residents or 19.3% of the country's population, followed by Johor with 3.3 million and Sabah with 3.2 million.

Under the Greater Kuala Lumpur or Klang Valley plan, it is estimated that there will be eight million people by 2020.

Housing and public transport have been identified as the most urgent issues to be resolved before that date.

This is why the affordable housing scheme and MRT project have gotten top priority from the Federal Government. But obviously that will not be enough as more and more people come to the Klang Valley to seek their fortune.

It's not just infrastructure that needs to be improved but other soft policies – like working hours and minimum wage – also need to be in place to ensure the growing population would be able to cope with the pressures of living in a metropolis.

Of course, the most important policy that needs to be tackled is the cost of living.

Any country or city that wants to be known as friendly and liveable must be affordable, too.

It is pointless having 100-storey buildings and six-star restaurants if the majority of the citizens do not get to enjoy such plush facilities because they cannot afford to.

It is great that the New Economic Model as proposed by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak calls for "breaking out of the middle-income trap and turning Malaysia into a high-income nation".

Parliament has already passed the first law required to make a minimum wage law but more needs to be done before we are a high-income nation.

The Government needs to push this agenda and spend time explaining it to the people.

The people do not seem to understand the concept because, not seeing any real increase in their pay packet, the perception they get is that only lip service is being paid to the policy.

What is made worse is that while global factors are driving up prices of daily items like food and fuel, the Government is talking about cutting back on subsidies.

The authorities need to come out with a comprehensive explanation programme so that there will be no misunderstanding of its policies, and these clarifications must be simple enough so that every person, regardless of educational background, can understand.

Another worrying point that the 2010 census has thrown up is that there are 14,562,638 males and 13,771,497 females in the country.

Many parents are worried over future partners for their children, especially since many of them place low priority on marriage to concentrate on career.

Kuala Lumpur and Selangor Chinese Assembly Hall president Tan Yew Sing pointed to career-minded women being among the major factors contributing to the shrinking Chinese population, which now only accounts for 24.6%, a drop of 2% from a decade ago (bumiputras account for 67.4%, Indians 7.3% and others 0.7% in the latest report).

When the census was carried out in 1991, the Chinese community made up 28.1% of the country's 18.38 million population then.

Tan also noted that more Chinese were moving to the urban areas, where they preferred to raise smaller families, and also that "a significant portion of the Chinese community was also known to have migrated".

I am sure that such changes are also affecting the Malay, Indian, Iban, Kadazan and other communities in Malaysia.

The shrinking population growth rates, downsized families and deferring marriages are issues that will change the characteristics of the country.

We will never make the 70 million population target even in 40 years' time and the Government must take into account such societal changes and draft new policies to ensure our country remains affordable, liveable and friendly to all.

Executive Editor Wong Sai Wan has settled for a son and a daughter but wonders what are their targets.