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A more meaningful developed nation by 2020

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A more meaningful developed nation by 2020

Abstract

WHERE you from? Where you go?" cab drivers often ask. Depending on which departure city in Asia and who is asking, I would say Malaysia or Australia. Australia is beyond their affordability. Too far and expensive, they say. Malaysia, however, usually strikes a sense of cultural affinity and wonder.

Many have heard of our mega malls, the Petronas Twin Towers, Putrajaya and work opportunities. "Very rich country," they say, comparing their 10-hour six-day week toiling away in the madness of their clogged-up streets and polluted cities to places like Kuala Lumpur.

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Many have heard of our mega malls, the Petronas Twin Towers, Putrajaya and work opportunities. "Very rich country," they say, comparing their 10-hour six-day week toiling away in the madness of their clogged-up streets and polluted cities to places like Kuala Lumpur.

Indeed, friends who have visited Malaysia are impressed by our infrastructure, our people and food, our hospitality, cheap Internet access, MRT and, yes, our shopping complexes and the Kuala Lumpur International Airport.

They are pleasantly surprised at how "safe" and "easy" it is to move around here despite travel advisories cautioning them to be vigilant against rising crime, snatch theft and credit card cheats. Australian travellers are even advised to "avoid all protests and demonstrations as they may turn violent and involve arrests".

Foreign visitors can certainly see the signifiers of wealth from Melaka and the Klang Valley to Ipoh and Penang. Colourful giant billboards that line the highways impress that we are becoming like any hyper-consumerist society in the West where consumption is seen as good for business. The higher the consumption, the better.

But what piques their curiosity is the political angst they read online and sense in casual conversations with the chattering classes in cafés where lattes cost around RM10 or more. The visitors wonder at the incongruity between apparent economic wealth in the country and simmering discontent among the people.

Indeed, the rise in goods and services produced by the country every quarter does not necessarily mean we are doing better in how we live and work or how we engage with our neighbours. Or what we do as individuals to improve the quality of our environment, how as a community we have access to fair opportunities regardless of race and class and how as the rakyat we mobilise our votes for greater transparency and accountability from those who govern us.

Nobel Prize-winning economist Amartya Sen theorised in the late 1990s that real progress happens when economic development and human capital grow together. Our freedom to achieve our full potential underpins national progress. We prosper when we are free to exercise our reasoned agency – unshackled from the "unfreedoms" caused by poverty, malnutrition, fear, tyranny, corruption, social deprivation and repression by the state.

Sen identifies the rights and opportunities that characterise human freedom as "political freedoms, economic facilities, social opportunities, transparency guarantees and protective security".

Of the five, we fail dismally in four: political freedoms, social opportunities, transparency guarantees and protective security. Various opinion polls by the Merdeka Centre in 2011 and 2012 consistently show that the rakyat are seriously worried about rising crime, prevalent corruption, exorbitant housing costs and declining education standards.

In the 2012 World Freedom Index – with one representing most free and seven least free – published by Freedom House in New York, Malaysia scored 3.84 for rule of law; 3.29 for accountability; 3.05 for anti-corruption, transparency and public voice; and 2.96 for civil liberties. The report noted that "it seemed doubtful that Najib's new policy drive would be any more successful than his predecessor's had been in stemming corrupt practices and ethnic tensions".

In his New Year address, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak said: "The decision on how the future of the country is to be shaped and where Malaysia is to be taken lies in our hands. Today, this

responsibility lies on our shoulders; whether Malaysia continues to move forward or back." His deputy Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin added: "As a result of transformation programmes by Barisan under the leadership of Najib as well as our unity, Malaysia is on a solid footing to emerge as a developed country." (*The Star*, Jan 1, 2013).

The fixation on Malaysia becoming a "developed country", a statistical concept that means naught to the people, completely misses the point.

Yes, Malaysia may qualify for "developed" status in about seven more years on economic indicators. By World Bank definition, we are becoming an upper-middle-income country with less than 4% of the population living below the poverty line. This achievement is generally attributed to the New Economic Policy. We are also on track, according to UN reports, to meet the Millennium Development Goals by 2015.

We may be wealthier today than 10 years ago, but is our sense of well-being and contentment any better? Here is where a Gross National Happiness Index from the Kingdom of Bhutan or the "well-being index" developed by Nicholas Gruen, chief executive of Lateral Economics in Melbourne, becomes relevant to place the rakyat on a par with GDP figures in the development discourse. The well-being index is now reported quarterly by the Fairfax newspapers.

The well-being index accounts for the contribution of human capital – the skills and mindsets that arise from our education – to national development. Other non-economic factors are how the country's income and wealth are distributed and whether we have fair access to socio-economic opportunities. Or are we living longer and healthier? Do we feel free to achieve our full potential?

Few, if any, of our incumbent politicians address these issues even as they unofficially campaign for the next general election and bribe with, and promise, what they will not be able to deliver.

Sometimes I wonder if the country could be in a more competitive economic position and politically progressive today if every capable and qualified Malaysian regardless of his race had fair and equal opportunities to excel and if meritocracy had ruled the world of academia and determined the access to government funding for R&D.

Or if systemic corruption and political patronage had been nipped in the bud and journalists had been allowed to operate freely according to their journalistic conscience rather than betray their readers by not reporting what they truly know about the corruption and poor governance that continue to erode public confidence in our institutions.