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The Roots of Malaysian Dignity

Nathaniel Tan

In talking about dignity, the first question we seem compelled to ask is: whose dignity?

In 2019, four universities have co-organised a forum on Malay dignity, which will be attended by ex-Prime Minister, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Some of the controversy surrounding that forum stems of course from the zero sum culture of Malaysian sociopolitics.

To summarise, in the field of Malaysian politics and economics, we seem obsessed over questions of how we should divide the pie, rather than over questions of how we should grow the pie.

Against this backdrop, the promotion of Malay dignity will be felt by some to be at the expense of the dignity of other Malaysian ethnic groups.

Perhaps this is what prompted DAP veteran Lim Kit Siang to ask: will this forum be followed by fora on the dignity of the Chinese, Indians, Kadazans, Ibans and so on, implying that it would be unfair if this did not come to pass.

The logical end of this reasoning is the somewhat absurd notion of a “dignity arms race”.

Arms races invariably leave almost everyone involved worse off than where they started.

The net result is more capability to do damage across the board, a greater propensity to pick fights in order to justify investing more and more into arms, and ultimately, less security.

The only people to profit from an arms race are, of course, arms dealers – the military industrial complex, where the actual arms race is concerned.

In our analogy, the closest thing we have to arms dealers are politicians who create a market for themselves by exploiting and playing on the insecurity of people.

This is particularly deplorable in a country whose biggest political parties are essentially race based.

The continued relevance of these parties depends in large part on a sense among the ethnic group they represent that they are under threat. Since it is an ethnic-based party, the most “logical” place for said threat to come from is from other ethnic groups.

Often times, such ethnic parties will go out of their way to engineer that fear, regardless of the degree to which the “threat” from other ethnic groups is real or not.

One peculiar oddity of the Malaysian experience is the manner in which Umno governed Malaysia for over 60 years, all the while claiming that the Malays were under constant threat.

Logically, if Umno was in power for all the time that it was, and was doing its job correctly, shouldn't they have succeeded in their self-proclaimed mission of securing the Malay position?

The fact that the line they sold decade after decade, about being under threat, never changed is an indictment of how building political movements on racial foundations traps one in a self-perpetuating loop.

Malaysia is, of course, not unique in this regard. When I started writing over a decade ago, I remarked on how odd it was that Malaysia organised its political parties along ethnic lines, arguing that it was one of the only countries in the world where this happened explicitly.

I thought that eventually we would fall in line with the rest of the world. It turns out, the rest of the world has to an extent fallen in line with us.

We now live in a world where identity politics is racing to the forefront of many a national discourse.

Xenophobia against immigrants has helped launch the political career of Donald Trump, paved the way for Brexit, and birthed various right wing nationalist parties in Europe.

So, is a forum on Malay dignity inherently racist?

I think the short answer is probably no; but I think it is definitely not going to be the first step in the direction that Malaysia truly needs to move in.

A vital question to ask is: what is the relationship between Malay dignity and Malaysian dignity?

I believe the key to a better Malaysia is understanding that these two are not only tied together, but one and the same thing.

There is no such thing as a Malaysia in which Malays have dignity, while other Malaysians do not; and there is no such thing as a Malaysia in which Malays do not have dignity, while other Malaysians do.

This may seem to some a bit of a bold claim, but I do believe it can be substantiated if we think about what the roots of dignity truly are.

Firstly, honest work for honest (and sufficient) pay is perhaps the foremost cornerstone of dignity. If one cannot feed oneself or one's family, then dignity is often highly elusive.

Secondly, dignity involves an atmosphere of mutual respect.

The only way to live with dignity is to always recognise and uphold the dignity of others.

By refraining from oppressing, bullying, or vilifying others, and choosing instead to respect everyone we interact with, we ensure the dignity both of ourselves and everyone we interact with.

Thirdly, and most importantly, dignity is internal.

While the preceding roots of dignity can be influenced considerably by external factors and conditions, the true, unshakeable core of dignity lies ultimately in an untouchable place deep within each and every one of us.

If we live our lives with integrity, and treat everyone around us fairly and honourably, no amount of poverty or oppression will truly be able to compromise our dignity.

If we subscribe to this understanding of the roots of dignity, is there anything about the challenges to dignity that is peculiar to one or another ethnic group in Malaysia?

I daresay there is none.

We are constantly being misled by politicians.

We are misled into believing that the core problem is the income gap between Malays and non-Malays.

Such a gap exists and needs to be closed, but the real core problem is the growing income gap between rich Malaysians and poor Malaysians.

We are misled into believing that people with a different skin colour or creed from us are constantly out to insult, demean and oppress us.

Such people exist, but do they truly represent the majority? Or do politicians turn themselves into virtual loudspeakers for those people, fanning small flames into entire forest fires?

Our pursuit for dignity must be rooted firstly in the kind of emotional intelligence that can resist getting fooled and riled up by those loudspeakers.

More importantly, it must be rooted in the unshakeable understanding that our dignity is inseparable from the dignity of our brothers and sisters.

When we truly internalise this understanding as a nation, we will – each and every one of us – be able to hold our heads high, together as one.

Nathaniel Tan is a communications consultant specialising in identifying the right goals, and using the right tools for the right job. He can be reached at nat@engage.my. The views expressed here are entirely the writer's own.

ABIM Calls on All to Support the National Healthcare System

Faisal Abdul Aziz

Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia (ABIM) refers to the statement by the Director General of Health, Tan Sri Dr Noor Hisham Abdullah regarding how the country's healthcare system will be paralyzed if there is no reduction in Covid-19 cases.

The Malaysian Ministry of Health (MOH) stated that Covid-19 cases have increased drastically to the point of 8,868 new cases as of the 8th of July, 2021. At the same time, the frontliners are becoming increasingly exhausted due to the lack of manpower. Moreover, the lack of medical equipment and hospital space is also becoming a critical problem.

ABIM emphasizes that Malaysians of various races can express their love for the country by assisting frontliners in carrying out their duties to treat Covid-19 patients.

Hence, ABIM together with Global Peace Mission (GPM) Malaysia, ACCIN and other multi-religious organizations, especially the Buddhist Organization Tzu-Chi Malaysia as well as the leaders of 20 Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) of various religions hereby launches a fundraising campaign to supply hospitals with medical and other needs in the spirit of #BangsaMalaysia.

So far, ABIM and other CSOs have supplied the main needs of several hospitals such as Kuala Lumpur Hospital, Ampang Hospital, Selayang Hospital, Tengku Ampuan Rahimah Klang Hospital and several others. ABIM stresses that this is a joint effort by CSOs in a #RakyatPimpinRakyat and #RakyatJagaRakyat spirit to unite all the people in supporting our nation's healthcare system.

Among the types of assistance provided are - ICU Ventilators, Portable Ventilators, High Floor Nasal Cannulas, Hospital Beds, ICU Beds, Syringe Pumps, Infusion Pumps, N95 Masks and others.

ABIM welcomes good Samaritan Malaysians to donate through:

1. Click directly on the link for online donations:

<https://jomsedekah.com/donations/supportfrontliners/>

2. Now it's even easier through #JomPay:

biller code: 29058

Ref 1: Name

Ref 2: Support FL

3. OR cash transfer/deposit to *Global Peace Mission bank account:*

Bank Islam: 14-023-01-002-922-4

Maybank Islamic: 5642-2161-1602

Affin islamic: 1051-9000-2871

CIMB Islamic: 8603-5325-13

Reference: Support FLO

Muhammad Faisal Abdul Aziz is currently the President of ABIM.

Vanishing Borneo: Saving One of the World's Last Great Places

Alex Shoumatoff

Palm oil is the second-most important oil in the modern consumer society, after petroleum. Producing it is a \$50-billion-a-year business. It's in a multitude of the household products in North America, Europe, and Australia: margarine, toothpaste, shampoo, lipstick, cookies, Nutella, you name it. Doritos are saturated with palm oil.

It's what gives chocolate bars their appetizing sheen – otherwise, they would look like mud. Palm oil has replaced artery-clogging ghee as India's main cooking oil. India is now the major consumer of this clear, tasteless oil squeezed from the nuts of the oil-palm tree, *Elais guyanensis*, originally from West Africa, but now grown pantropically, mainly within ten degrees north and south of the Equator.

Indonesia and Malaysia chose palm oil as their main economic engine after independence in the 1960s, and they together account for 85 percent of world production, which is expected to double by 2050.

As oils go, palm oil gives you the best bang for your buck. Soy fields yield far less than rows of oil-palm trees and have to be replanted annually, while the palms keep bearing huge clusters of oil-rich nuts for 20 years and can then be replaced. In 2015 17 million hectares of oil palm yielded a total of 62 million tons of oil, while the 120 million hectares planted in soy yielded 48 million tons. Palm oil doesn't lose its properties when it's heated, or become rancid at room temperature, and it has multiple industrial uses. It is the edible vegetable oil of choice and is not going away.

Borneo is ground zero for oil-palm devastation. Nowhere has more native rain forest been wiped out. The world's third-largest island, Borneo's lower 73 percent is in Indonesia—the territory of Kalimantan—and its upper portion consists of two states in Malaysia, Sarawak and Sabah, separated by the small, oil-rich sultanate of Brunei.

Fifty percent of the lowland Borneo rain forest, which once covered all of the island up to 10,000 feet, is gone, but it's still the third-largest in the world, after the Amazon and Equatorial Africa's. It is part of the most ancient rain forest—forest, period—on earth: 130 million years old, more than twice as old as the Amazon's, and has the greatest density of higher plant species, an estimated 15,000 flowering species. Each new botanical or entomological expedition comes back with new species. Some 20,000 insect species have been found in Sarawak's Gunung Mulu National Park alone.

Borneo is the world capital of dipterocarps, trees with two-winged fruits that grow in tropical lowlands and tend to be “emergents,” rising singly above the canopy. It has 380 of the 500 species in existence. 250 are endemic, found only on Borneo, including *Shorea faguetana*, the tallest tropical tree anywhere, reaching 290 feet.

Ten of the emergent dipterocarp species have beautiful, hard wood and are sought after by the logging companies, most of which are Chinese. China is the main market now for lumber from Borneo. It used to be Japan.

Fantastic butterflies and moths, like the gigantic Rajah Brooke birdwing, have come into being in this primordial forest. And the Bornean wild pig, the Bornean pygmy elephant and pygmy rhinoceros, and *Pongo pygmaeus*, a different species of orangutan from the Sumatran. And orangutans are easy to have an interspecies experience with because they share 97 percent of our genes and are fantastic facial mimics.

There are still hunter-gatherers in the heart of the island who hunt with blowguns and leave 100 different signs of bent branches and folded leaves for each other in the forest and have 1,200 names for different trees and their corresponding spirits and until two generations ago believed that this is only one of nine different worlds in the cosmos.

Every day throughout the year begins and ends with the six o'clock cicadas sounding off, and the haunting hoot choruses of the gibbons, and the fantastic arias of the bulbuls, and a riotous biophony of insects rattling and stridulating, and birds singing their hearts out.

The mountainous thickly jungled heart of Borneo was one of the last blank spots on the map, terra incognita, through World War II. The most remote bands of nomadic blowgun hunters were not reached by missionaries until the late 1970s. Now they live in modern longhouses with TVs and

electricity, but they still go off into the forest and hunt for days at a time, and a few bands still circulate in the forest and make new camps of raised pole huts every few weeks. Even the most isolated and traditional people in the central highlands are acutely aware of the modern world. Loggers are taking out their biggest trees, their rivers are being polluted and impounded by hydroelectric dams.

In the 1950s, as synthetic rubber largely put an end to the natural rubber business, chainsaws and Caterpillar tractors arrived on Borneo. The following decade, the eradication of the rain forest began in earnest. First the commercial dipterocarps were felled and hauled out, then the remaining mangled forest was torched, a few days before rain was expected. But sometimes the rain didn't come and the peat forest, with up to 20 feet of decomposing, combustible vegetable matter in its deep soil, would burn for months.

That is what happened in 1997 when a pall of smoke from peat fires in Kalimantan, smothered southeast Asia and drifted east, all the way to Japan. That year, the peat fires released 2.5 billion tons of carbon. It happened again in 2003-4 and in 2015-6, when thousands of orangutans died of starvation and thousands of people in Kalimantan were hospitalized for smoke inhalation. Indonesia's peat fires are a significant source of greenhouse gas emissions.

By the 1980s, the deforestation rate on Borneo was the highest on the planet, and in recorded history, and this continued into the new millennium. In the last 20 years the orangutans have lost 90 percent of their habitat. There are only maybe 30,000 left, and very little available forest left to release the ones in cages in care centers.

There's a lot the individual consumer can do. Help Orangutan Foundation International acquire rain forest where it can release its hundreds of rescued orangutans. Support the Rainforest Action Network's Conflict Palm Oil campaign to pressure the snack-food giants to commit to zero further deforestation or child or indentured labor on the concessions from which they source their palm oil. Nestle, Mars, Unilever, Cargill (the biggest consumer of palm oil in the United States), and other snack-food giants are on board, but PepsiCo continues to be a laggard, so boycott its products.

Do without Doritos. Find out if palm oil is in the things you are eating and using— it has 19 aliases— and cut down on or eliminate your consumption of these products. Some 70 percent of what is labeled "vegetable oil" is palm oil.

The clearing and burning of peat forest has to be permanently banned. But on-the-ground verification that there is no further deforestation, that strips of forest have been left as wildlife corridors and along watercourses, is a huge problem, with all the corruption surrounding this lucrative commodity. Meanwhile species continue to be wiped out before they are even discovered, the most tragic type of extinction. Truly sustainable palm oil is still a long way off.

Support the investigations of the Bruno Manser Fonds, a Swiss NGO that has traced laundered profits from palm oil and logging in Sarawak from the former longtime chief minister and his family members and cronies to an upscale mall and condo complex in Ottawa, and a gated golf course community in the Arizona Desert.

Keep abreast of the latest developments on Borneo and the spread of oil-palm cultivation around the Equator. The sad thing is that few modern consumers are aware of this far-away biocultural holocaust or of their complicity in it.

There have been some encouraging developments, particularly in Sarawak, which has elected a new chief minister, who is more supportive of the state's 40-some ethnic groups and has cancelled the massive Baram Dam.

The 20,000-forest people who would have been displaced by its impounded water will have their land restored to them. Sarawak's entire misguided, ecologically disastrous dam-building program has been cancelled. But in Indonesia and Papua New Guinea, pristine rain forest continues to be annihilated. This is a global battle for the cultural diversity of the tropics. We have to keep the pressure on.

Alex Shoumatoff is the editor of Dispatches from The Vanishing World, which is devoted to documenting, celebrating, and making people aware of the planet's fast-disappearing biocultural diversity. The article is published with the permission of Yale School of the Environment

Understanding the Spirit of Supremacy of the Constitution in Rukun Negara

Noor'Ashikin Hamid

Rukun Negara is the Malaysian declaration of national philosophy drafted by the National Consultative Council and launched on 31st August 1970. The Rukun Negara aspires to establish a substantial unity of a nation. The principles in the Rukun Negara serve as an integrative key to harmonious and unity of the people in ensuring Malaysia's success and stability.

To realize the aspiration above, five (5) principles are presented, namely the "Belief in God"; "Loyalty to the King and Country"; "Supremacy of the Constitution"; "Rules of Law"; and "Courtesy and Morality." However, there is a postulation that Rukun Negara's inclusion as a preamble may undermine constitutional supremacy.

Malaysia in 1957 adopted a written and supreme charter. The Constitution is the supreme law of the Federation. Constitutional supremacy means the government's inferiority whereby the legislature's power to make law is ceded to the requirements of a Constitution.

Under Keluhuran Perlembagaan, it becomes an obligation for all the people to accept, obey and uphold the Constitution. The Constitution provides that "the Federal Constitution is the supreme law of the land and any law passed after the Merdeka Day which is inconsistent to the constitution shall be void to the extent of the inconsistency".

The law passed by the Parliament or any State Legislature is valid if it is coherent with the provisions of the Constitution. It covers all pre- and post-independence legislations. The Constitution states that law passed before Merdeka Day will be valid as long as it is consistent with the Constitution and continues to be in force on and after Merdeka Day until repealed by the competent authority empowered by the Constitution.

The modification to conflicting laws must be made to ensure the validity of that law. State law must be consistent with the Constitution or federal law. The law that is incompatible with federal law shall be void as stated in Article 162(2) and Article 75. Article 162(6) states that "the court or tribunal may apply the provision of any existing law which has not been modified on or after Merdeka Day to make it consistent with the provisions of the constitution."

Article 128 of the Constitution provides that the Federal Court has the power of determining the validity of the legislation. The court may declare a legislative or judiciary as ultra vires and void if they are inconsistent with the Constitution. This is to prevent the abuse of power. In the latest case of *Letitia Bosman V. PP & Other Appeals (2020)*, the Federal Court held that “the Penal Code is a law that codifies most criminal offenses and punishments in Malaysia and s. 302 has been there in the Straits Settlement Code since 1872.

Being a pre-Merdeka law, s. 302 of the Code could not be declared void or invalid pursuant to art. 4 of the FC. Any inconsistency between this provision and the FC can only be removed by invoking cl. (6) of art. 162. For any legislation passed after the Merdeka Day, the court’s power to strike down for inconsistency with the FC stems from cl. (1) of art. 4 of the FC” (paras 13-15 & 17). The doctrine of constitutional supremacy means that the Constitution must guide every act of the Legislative.

According to the rule of law related to constitutional supremacy, the judiciary must make sure that Parliament legislates according to the constitutional framework and all its agencies administer the legislation. By virtue of constitutional supremacy, the courts act as the final arbiter to issues related to the constitutions, and the judiciary is expected to demonstrate judicial dynamism to protect the Constitution.

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Upholding Courtesy and Morality

Hussain Yusri Zamawi

The fifth principle of Rukun Negara is courtesy and morality. This means a person is owes responsibility to act in good behavior and morality towards each other in society members regardless of their status. According to Oxford Dictionary, ‘courtesy’ is defined “as the showing of politeness in one’s attitude and behavior towards others.” While ‘morality’ supports the distinction between right and wrong or good and bad behavior.

The principle of courtesy and morality is aimed at controlling one’s behavior and cultivating noble character, as well as a polite life order for the well-being of every Malaysian citizen. It serves as a guide to the behavior of society.

It is maintained and developed accordingly with the character of the nation and pure values. This courtesy and morality principle allows the nation to build a better and liberal motion in accepting the practice other religions, races, and cultures in the life of people of a multiracial country with respect and without discriminating against each other.

Parliament may enact any law to safeguard morality in Malaysia. Article 10 of the Constitution provides for freedom of speech, as well as the right to assemble peaceably and without arms that include the right of processions or pickets because a procession or picket is an assembly in motion.

However, the right to assembly must be walled by restraints because freedom of speech may either be a way to tell the truth and encourage intellectual discourse, or it may be an instrument of malice and hatred.

The sources of pornography, racial bigotry, and promoters of anarchy, treason, and blasphemy often employed the Constitution as a shield behind which to hide. The media consistently confuses between matters of public interest and matters in which the public has a morbid or hidden interest.

For this reason, all legal systems and societies, including Malaysia, impose some restraints on freedom of speech to secure the community's broader interest. In *Ling Wah Press (M) Sdn Bhd & Ors v. Tan Sri Dato' Vincent Tan Chee Yioun* (2000), Eusoff Chin CJ in Federal Court decision said: "... *freedom of speech is not an absolute right. Freedom of speech is not a license to defame people. It is subject to legal restrictions. An absolute or unrestricted right to free speech would result in persons recklessly maligning others with impunity, and the exercise of such right would do the public more harm than good. Every person has a right to reputation, and that right ought to be protected by law*".

A national survey was conducted by KAJIDATA Research from 10 to 18th July 2017 to assess the level of pride of being a Malaysian. A total of 1,041 registered voters in Malaysia comprising 54.7% Malays, 24.6% Chinese, 7.3% Indian, 6.2% Bumiputera Sabah, 6.1% Bumiputera Sarawak, 0.6% Orang Asli and 0.6%.

Respondents were selected based on random stratified sampling along with ethnicity, gender, age, and state according to national demographics. The results indicated that Malaysians believe that unity was one of the vital building blocks of the nation. A total of 98.3% of the Malaysians stated their satisfaction as a Malaysian and with 85.9% responded that the Rukun Negara could be the foundation that promoted and fostered unity.

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The Rukun Negara and Modern Science and Technology

Omar Abdul Rahman

The Rukun Negara which was launched on August 31st, 1970 comes in two parts: the objectives and the principles. Now, it is again the principles that are being emphasised; just like in the past the objectives are always elided. The result is that many are unaware of the transformational message of Rukun Negara which goes beyond national unity and social harmony.

The objectives are: 1. Achieving a greater unity of her people, 2. Maintaining a democratic way of life, 3. Creating a just society with equitable sharing of prosperity, 4. Ensuring a liberal approach to the country's rich and diverse cultural traditions and 5. Building a progressive society by harnessing modern science and technology.

Equitable sharing of prosperity

If we look closely at the five objectives and where we are today, as a nation we are guilty of ignoring them and of not translating them into actionable practices, beyond just reciting the five principles. Take the examples of the mutually re-enforcing third and fifth objectives.

Equitable sharing of prosperity is a function of a robust economy which is dependent on capacity to harness modern science and technology. In this context becoming 'a high-income economy, innovation driven, private sector led' has been the declared target of successive government of the

day. Yet we are still caught in the middle-income trap. It is a reflection that our innovative capacity, our capacity to harness modern science and technology, is suboptimal.

If we look from the perspective of TNC in STI (total national capacity in science, technology and innovation), enhancement is much needed in each of its components which comprise:

- A government committed to providing a comprehensive STI physical and soft infrastructures.
- A scientific and technological community, ethical and competent and able to contribute to and draw from the global pool of scientific knowledge and technological knowhow.
- A private sector capable of creating wealth through the application of technology and innovation in both traditional and new sectors of the economy.
- A society that is 'at ease with science', literate and imbued with a culture of creativity, innovativeness and entrepreneurship.
- An efficient governance system, including an effective science advice sub-system, enabling effective policy making, planning, implementation; and public debate and international collaborations that ensures long term commitment to STI development.

Nation still in 'catch up stage'

As examples, in terms of the basic and high-tech infrastructure, network cohesion and global integration, Malaysia is placed in the 'catch-up stage' compared to the 'frontier stage' of our southern neighbour. We have failed to achieve R&D expenditure of 1.5 % of the GDP and of 60 R&D personnel per 10,000 population, two important targets we set for ourselves for 2010.

It is not that the country has not been alerted about having to optimise our capacity to 'harness modern science and technology'. The Academy of Sciences Malaysia (ASM) published in 2015 the "SCIENCE OUTLOOK", which identified our enduring and entrenched weaknesses in six strategic areas: STI Governance; Research, Development and Commercialisation; STI Talent; Engineering Industries; STI Enculturation and Strategic International Alliances.

Sixteen recommendations for improvement across the STI landscape were made including:

- Empower a centralised inter-ministerial STI coordination and monitoring body to garner stakeholder participation; establish a Parliamentary Select Committee on STI.
- Empower a centralised body to promote seamless RD&C implementation, management and monitoring to evaluate beyond traditional return on investment.
- Bridge the gap between policy and reality through review of implementation; strategise effective policy measures to retain STI talent.
- Aggressive and continuous dissemination of STI agenda to industry players to enhance their understanding and involvement.
- Establish strategic long-term plan on STI enculturation.
- "Forge and increase STI-focused international alliances to establish Malaysia's leadership and achieve excellence".

Recommendations ignored

However, "The Science Outlook 2017" states in its conclusion: "Malaysia's aspiration to be an advanced nation requires all sectors to have the capacity for developing knowledge capital to fuel Malaysia's drive to be an advanced economy. It is unfortunate that most of the recommendations

outlined in the Science Outlook 2015 have not been taken up by the relevant stakeholders; thus affecting the momentum of Malaysia's science, technology and innovation (STI) endeavours.”

The ASM's Science Outlook is an example of science advice which is one subcomponent of the TNC in STI. The fact that the recommendations made in 2015 elicited no response would indicate that our capacity to give advice is not matched with capacity to receive and act on good advice. In view of the seriousness of this deficit, and the urgency of optimising the TNC in STI, what is needed to be put in place is a National STI Action Council, to deal with urgent issues in policy, consolidated programmes and implementation oversight across all sectors of the economy and of government.

Encouragingly there are new initiatives being put in place, such as the National Technology and Innovation Sandbox. However, such an initiative should be part of a comprehensive national STI agenda and actions at improving our TNC in STI must be a sustained commitment not vulnerable to capricious political agenda. Otherwise, the objectives 3 and 5 will not be achieved; we will fail to do justice to Rukun Negara.

Omar Abdul Rahman (Tan Sri Prof Emeritus) is currently Fellow of Academy of Sciences, Malaysia

Time to Reform Social Protection Policies

Paul Selva Raj

Social protection includes policies, programmes and measures aimed at ensuring a basic standard of living for a nation's people and protecting them against major shocks such as serious illnesses, injury and unemployment.

The Covid-19 pandemic that destroyed people's livelihoods has severely tested the current social protection policies. Bank Negara pointed out that there are three components of social protection in Malaysia – social safety nets, social insurance and labour market policies.

Social safety net aims to ensure basic needs are met, for example food, housing, health and education as well as efforts to eradicate poverty. The forms of social safety net include cash handouts, as well as benefits in kind such as public hospitals and schools.

To ease people's burden, the government launched stimulus packages to assist workers affected by the pandemic. Direct one-off cash assistance of RM500 to RM1,600 (under Bantuan Prihatin Nasional) and one-off cash assistance of RM350 to RM1,800 (Bantuan Prihatin Rakyat) was given to those affected.

The poverty line wage in Malaysia is RM2,208 per month, with RM1,169 for food and RM1,038 for non-food items. According to Bank Negara Malaysia (BNM), the living wage in Kuala Lumpur for single, childless couples and couples with two children is RM2,700, RM4,500 and RM6,500, respectively.

Thus, it is clear the assistance provided is substantially below the poverty line or the living wage. The support for families and households is also clearly inadequate. Social insurance is aimed at providing resilience and support to individuals and families from shocks, and to prevent poverty.

Most workers contribute to the support fund. Two of the major social schemes in Malaysia are EPF (Employees Provident Fund) and Socso (Social Security Organisation).

According to Unicef and UNFPA (United Nations Population Fund) report “Families on Edge: Impact of Covid-19 on low income urban families”:

- 52% of households are not protected by EPF/Socso,
- Females face greater challenge – 57% of female households are not protected.

The workers most affected by lack of social protection are those in the informal sector, micro businesses such as hawkers, and small businesses as well as workers in the gig economy.

Through the i-Letsari, i-Sinar and i-Chitra schemes, EPF contributors were allowed to withdraw their savings for their needs and that of their families, in order to face the economic challenges.

Based on the withdrawals for the three schemes, it is highly probable that the savings remaining after the withdrawal by many of the contributors is almost gone. They would have nothing left for the needs of their families, such as education and housing, or have enough for their retirement. Due to their dire current needs, their future critical needs had to be abandoned.

Labour market policies are aimed at enhancing economic opportunities and potential of individuals, and includes job placement programmes, upskilling and reskilling programmes and job incentives. Labour market policies include minimum wage and workers protection laws.

The government had also assisted through the Employment Insurance Scheme, encompassing 80% of workers’ salary for the first month, 50% for the second month, 40% for the third and fourth month, and 30% for the fifth and sixth month. However, this support was only during the initial stages of the pandemic, on March 2020; after which further support was lacking.

According to a survey by the Entrepreneur Development and Cooperatives Ministry in July 2021, more than 90% of the enterprises had no insurance while 70% had no safety nets to fall back on should they lose their jobs.

Safety nets are crucial to ensure vulnerable families achieve some level of support with a minimum standard of living. Yet the BNM report, “A Vision for Social Protection in Malaysia”, states that safety net programmes are ineffective due to it being managed by multiple agencies at both the federal and state levels.

It stated, for example, that despite the sizeable expenditure of RM17.1 billion (1.1% of gross domestic product, the pay-out under each programme was small and insufficient to ensure that the most vulnerable households were able to meet minimum income and living standards.

Social protection expert Prof Emeritus Norma Mansor opined that social protection programmes in Malaysia are inadequate to mitigate risks and shocks. She pointed out that the system is fragmented and ineffective, with low coverage.

Clearly, there is a critical need to reform the current social protection policies in Malaysia.

Paul Selva Raj is currently the Secretary General of FOMCA.

