

The Role of Social Sciences in Malaysian National Development

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INTRODUCTION

The subject of my paper, “The Role of Social Sciences in Malaysian National Development”, may seem defensive as though social sciences are on the retreat, and that its relevance has to be justified despite the fact that our society has become far more complex today than ever before. However, I am addressing far larger concerns, namely the importance of investing in social sciences for the benefit of our Malaysian nation and our future.

Malaysia has embarked on the path of development through export-oriented industrialisation, urbanisation, rural development, foreign trade, integration with the world market, and participation in the globalisation process. Without meaning to blow our own trumpet, the score card is that we have not done badly and our achievements have been impressive. We are one of the most developed and industrialised nations in the Third World, one of the most successful among the Muslim countries and the 18th largest trading nation in the world.

The last two decades of the twentieth century were periods of rapid economic growth and increasing prosperity - a period of boom. Although hit temporarily by the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis, Malaysia did not go bust; its growth picked up again, and it is now moving forward to become a developed nation by 2020. To realise this vision, the new Prime Minister Dato’ Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi has introduced a number of over-arching plans – the National Mission as contained in the Ninth Malaysia Plan, the Third Industrial Master Plan, the National Integrity Plan, and several others.

BUILDING ON OUR STRENGTH, OVERCOMING WEAKNESSES

However, today we are standing at a crossroad, a watershed into the future. Being at this historical juncture in the first decade of the twenty first century, it is important to reflect on the path we have trodden since the previous century, draw appropriate lessons from our development experience, build on our strength and overcome our weaknesses to avoid the pitfalls to the future.

What is our major strength? Also, what is our most serious pitfall? In my view, our great strength consists of a complex of factors. We have done very well in terms of material development. We have built a first class infrastructure

in many parts of the country, and we are increasingly integrated with the rest of the world through air, sea, telecommunications and the internet. We have a new administrative capital, Putrajaya, with the state-of-the art buildings and facilities, the envy of many developing countries. Household names among the transnational corporations such as IBM, Sony and Honda, have their companies and investments here while a number of our Malaysian-owned conglomerates have flexed their muscles globally. Our Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has increased many times over since independence and the level of our people's income and living standards has consistently been on an upward trend. We have a good and modern education system with many schools, colleges and universities. Our health care system is modern and sophisticated, and has contributed significantly to our high life expectancy. It does not really come as a surprise therefore that Malaysia has moved up from 'medium human development' to 'high human development' this year, thus placing our country in the ranks of the developed nations measured on the United Nations Human Development Index (HDI).

We can go on adding to the list. However, what is our most serious weakness? This is the most important and urgent thing for us to identify in order to manage effectively the social transformation.

We have to be clear about what development is and for. To my mind, at the core of economic development as well as scientific and technological advancement are human beings with their rich cultural diversity and beliefs, as well as their historical attachment to fellow human beings and the environment. Whatever our development strategies and programmes, we must have the human being in mind, so that our development has a human soul and is human-friendly. The ultimate goal of development is not for the sake of growth and profit per se. Rather, growth and profit are the means towards achieving a better quality of life and human advancement.

To advance materially and improve the quality of life, science and technology is undoubtedly highly important. This, we all agree. However, what needs to be stressed is that a one-sided emphasis on material development and on science and technology, i.e. developing mainly the 'hardware' at the expense of developing the 'software' – viz. human beings with their culture and social resources - will undermine the values that we want to preserve and nurture in order to build a united Malaysian nation of diverse ethnic groups and to build the Malaysian civilisation.

This is what I consider to be the weakest point in Malaysian national development, the under-emphasis of the integrity and wellbeing of human beings, the quality of human capital, and of human existence.

REVISITING VISION 2020

This is not to say that our leaders, planners and intellectuals did not see the need to pay attention to the ‘software’ before. In fact, on 28 February 1991, the then Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad put forward Vision 2020 in which he postulated that Malaysia aspire to become a developed nation ‘in its own mould’ within three decades, i.e. by 2020. A developed Malaysian nation in Vision 2020 is defined as a nation that is united, confident of itself, buttressed by strong moral and ethical values, and whose people practise a democratic, liberal, and tolerant way of life, enjoying a just and equitable economy that is progressive and prosperous, an economy that is competitive, dynamic, robust and resilient.

In revisiting Vision 2020, we should take note that it has already been emphasised that in order to become a developed nation, Malaysia must address nine challenges, viz. (1) building a united Bangsa Malaysia or Malaysian nation; (2) building a liberated and confident society that aspires towards excellence; (3) building a mature democratic society based on consultation and consensus; (4) building a society with strong moral and ethical values; (5) building a mature, liberal and tolerant society; (6) building a scientific, progressive and innovative society, whose members are not only consumers but more importantly, are inventors and innovators; (7) building a caring society; (8) building an economically just society; and (9) building a prosperous, competitive, dynamic, robust and resilient economy. Of all the nine challenges, seven are sociocultural and political in nature, one on science and technology, while the ninth challenge is economic. In short, most of the challenges are meant to address the ‘software’ while only one or two the ‘hardware’.

However, in terms of implementation, of all the nine challenges in Vision 2020, the emphasis has been on the economic and the science and technology challenge, while the other challenges have not been given equal emphasis. With the benefit of hindsight, this is not at all surprising. This is so because the 1990s when Vision 2020 was launched was a booming period. In the words of the renowned economist and Nobel Laureate, Joseph Stiglitz, the 1990s was “the roaring nineties” and “the greediest decade in history”. The emphasis was growth and profit.

Thus, it is not surprising that Malaysia of the 1990s, emphasised material development instead of being focused on holistic and sustainable development. The noble aspirations and grand ideals of Vision 2020 that already contained the fine elements of the importance of developing the ‘software’ and building the Malaysian civilisation were somewhat lost in the quagmire of the cash nexus and market imperatives.

NEW AWAKENING: THE NATIONAL MISSION

The most serious danger is that if we were to follow this trend without checking it, we may end up building a 'rich society with poor souls' - rich in material terms, but impoverished culturally and spiritually. Fortunately, the Asian financial crisis almost a decade ago shook us from our 'comfort zone' and brought forth a new awareness or awakening of the dire consequences if we were to focus largely on material development and crass material consumption, and neglect holistic and sustainable development, and the development of the 'software'. The mounting pressures – both domestic and international - for balanced development, for ethics and integrity, good governance, transparency, accountability, respect for human rights and gender parity, that had already been developing before the crisis, soon became a clear trend in the society and among certain circles of the government.

These developments were subsequently translated into the formulation of a number of national policies, strategies and programmes, while public debates have been reorientated again towards balanced development, towards a culture of whistle blowing, towards stepping up the fight against corruption, and promoting a stronger level of national unity and integration, and upholding the public good. Building a strong family, community and citizenry, intensifying efforts at building a safe society with crimes under control, as well as revitalising our cultural life and heritage has become an important agenda today.

A concentrated expression of this can be seen in the launching by the Government of the National Social Policy in 2003, the National Integrity Plan (NIP) and the Malaysian Institute of Integrity in 2004 as well as the National Mission in the Ninth Malaysia Plan in March 2006. It also reiterated that we must address the nine challenges of Vision 2020 holistically. At the same time, there is a revisit of *Rukun Negara* the guiding National Ideology formulated in 1969. The *Rukun Negara* emphasises the goal of building a united, just, democratic, liberal and progressive society. It emphasises on the five pillars – the belief in God, loyalty to the King and country, the supremacy of the Constitution, upholding the rule of law, and practising good behaviour and morality.

In keeping with the spirit of the above, we find the emphasis in the National Mission is, that while we move up the scale of economic development ladder and strive to provide added value to the economy to ensure competitiveness and resilience, we must simultaneously develop human capital and first class mentality; reduce socioeconomic disparity between ethnic groups, rural-urban strata and between regions; enhance the quality and sustainability of life; and strengthen the capacity of implementation and institutions. All these constitute the five major thrusts in the National Mission.

We are also happy to note that in the National Social Policy, the focus is on the development of the family, women, older persons, children, the disabled

and the community – the necessary ingredients in order to build a caring society. In the National Integrity Plan (NIP), the focus is on enhancing ethics and integrity and to make it a way of life; on fighting corruption, abuse of power and other ills of society; and on building a society with high moral values and ethical standards in keeping with the fourth challenge of Vision 2020. The NIP emphasises that this momentous and noble task is not the responsibility of the Government alone; rather it is the responsibility of the Government together with all other stakeholders and must involve all sectors of society.

However, to ensure this new awareness and concern as well as the new policies and reiterataion of earlier policies would achieve the desired results and do not remain mere platitudes, there must be continued strong political will and focus on implementation, enforcement, monitoring and constant evaluation on the part of the country's leaders, policy implementors and other stakeholders in society. Attention must be paid to capacity and capability to translate this historic agenda into effective practical policy action. And in order to make the leap, we must continue to have the contributions not only of knowledge in the fields of of science and technology, but very importantly and critically, the fields of social sciences to strive towards a developed nation status that upholds balanced and holistic development.

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

This brings me to the key question of the role of social sciences in national development. Malaysian social sciences has an institutional history of about five decades in this country. Its development has been most dramatic since the 1970s with the setting up of several new universities and the introduction of new faculties and departments that offer various social science disciplines.

Ever since independence in 1957 until today, social science scholars and practitioners have put to good use their social science knowledge to perform their core business – teaching, research and publication in the universities, and also to address problems of society. They have also provided inputs to policy formulation, implementation and evaluation. A number of them have been involved in the formulation of various key policy documents such as the *Rukun Negara* and the New Economic Policy, the National Agricultural Policy, the National Development Policy, the National Vision Policy, the National Social Policy, the National Integrity Plan, and others. Quite a number too have been commissioned to conduct research projects on specific themes by the various Government ministries and agencies, the State Governments, as well as by the private sector. Over and above that, a number of social science scholars also sit on various national and state-level committees to provide input on policy issues. They also serve as expert resource persons who are referred to whenever certain

situations arise. They have made valuable contributions to the country's development.

However, to attain further progress, social scientists need to raise the level and quality of their knowledge and expertise. The kind of social science that we need has to be good, rigorous and analytical, social science that is committed to truth and objectivity, that can analyse the present and the past and offer prognosis of the future. We also need social scientists who are frontier thinkers, who are ethical and highly professional in their approach to work. We need social scientists who can engage in debates with the best from different parts of the world on the same level ground, and those who can engage policy makers and the private sector constructively yet critically towards ensuring balanced development in Malaysia.

The main criticism levelled at the social scientists is that they tend to make analysis of events that have already taken place, are not able to anticipate impending events, and are often reactive rather than proactive. There is a time lag between analysis and the actual unfolding of events, such that their recommendations are often overtaken by the very events they are supposed to provide solutions for. This criticism is valid and they have to accept it.

Nevertheless, taking stock of the overall situation, we feel that social science and social scientists should be accorded greater official recognition commensurate with the importance of their expertise and the relevance of social sciences in unravelling problems of our society and showing the way to the future. The recognition should come in the form of policy acknowledgement of the importance of social science in its own right in national development just like science and technology. There should also be greater financial support and facilities for research, publication, conferences and other related activities, as well as support for professional associations and group of scholars that carry out such activities.

ESTABLISH THE MALAYSIAN NATIONAL SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH COUNCIL AND THE MALAYSIAN SOCIAL SCIENCE ACADEMY

To advance the social science corpus and contribute to policy-making and national development, social science must be accorded its deserved status institutionally. Since the late 1990s, Malaysian social scientists through the Malaysian Social Science Association have been championing the setting up of the Malaysian National Social Science Research Council as the official umbrella body to oversee and fund research in the social sciences and humanities. At the same time, while Malaysia has already set up the Malaysian National Science Academy, it should take the next crucial step towards establishing the Malaysian Social Science Academy – an initiative, which a number of other Asian countries

have done. The Social Science Academy should serve as a centralised body that could house various public social science and humanities research institutes in the country. This would greatly facilitate the pooling together of our research expertise and resources, planning of our research priorities and coordination of research programmes and projects.

Malaysia must take the bold step in making the necessary investment not only for the advancement of social science as a corpus of knowledge but also to institutionalise it. In this way, social science and social scientists can contribute more meaningfully towards Malaysian national development.

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