

A knight in shining armour

Tributes to Tan Sri Adenan Satem, the late Sarawak chief minister, are still pouring in. The Parent Action Group for Education (PAGE) is saddened yet humbled to be adding to the outpouring of grief as not only the people of Sarawak but the whole nation mourn a great and trusted elder. No leader has had such an impressionable impact, even if only briefly, on our lives in a long time.

Selfless parents who are proponents of the importance of the English language heaved a sigh of relief every time Adenan (call me CM) spoke of education, our ethnic and religious diversity as our strength and the essence and spirit of what being, living and breathing as a Malaysian was all about. If only every one of our rulers, leaders and heads of state was on the same page, firmly emulating and internalising the ideals of Sarawak, we would live in peace and harmony.

There were several areas of education that CM was passionate about and fiercely committed to. He remarked how “stupid” it was for the government to have switched to Bahasa Malaysia as the medium of instruction in national schools “30 years ago” and allowed the quality of the English language to deteriorate. After the riots of May 13, 1969, the second prime minister Tun Abdul Razak decided that Malaysia was sorely in need of a national identity and directed that Bahasa Malaysia be gradually introduced to the education system.

At that point, Malaysia enjoyed a quali-

ty of education that was equal to Singapore’s but sadly no more. CM opined that graduates these days could not get a job because they could not speak proper English. He blamed the national education policy, which purportedly does not prioritise the teaching and learning of English, causing the unemployment of between 15,000 and 20,000 graduates. He felt that the country should have emphasised both languages equally.

CM revived and revisited the long-forgotten Malaysia Agreement that Sarawak had endorsed in 1963 to form the country as it is today. For Sarawak, it was the 18-point agreement that its youth needed to be reminded of. It stated that, among others, English should be the official language of Borneo (Sabah and Sarawak) for all purposes, state or federal, without a limitation of time (Point 2C) and that the existing educational system of Borneo should be maintained, and for this reason it should be under state control (Point 15).

Taking his cue from the 18-point agreement, CM declared that English would be the second official language of Sarawak after Bahasa Malaysia. Prior to this, if correspondence with the government was not in Bahasa Malaysia, it was not entertained. He insisted that official correspondence should be in both Bahasa Malaysia and English and opined that the



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BY NOOR AZIMAH
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“country risked being left behind and looking stupid if it didn’t join the world in using the language”. He also believed that as foreign direct investment flowed into the state, contracts would be signed and sealed, and more often than not, these would be drafted and conducted in English. The state could not possibly be a party to contracts that it did not understand, he said.

CM also stressed that science and mathematics should be taught in English, which is the “language of science, learning, literature, technology, business, research, communication and international relations”. The sheer volume of books on science and mathematics are published in English. CM doubted that the country’s authority on Bahasa Malaysia — Dewan Bahasa & Pustaka — could cope with the volume of new material daily. He asked if DBP had the capacity and capability to translate everything and questioned why science and mathematics could not be learnt in English.

As English is the language of international trade, CM advised that we take a practical approach to gaining knowledge. Give more attention to English and do not flip-flop on the education policy, he said, referring to the abolition of the teaching and learning of

science and mathematics in English. He was criticised by Yayasan Karyawan, Perkasa and former cabinet minister Tan Sri Rais Yatim for that statement.

CM also urged the universities and colleges to prioritise science, technology and engineering courses so as to produce a professional and skilled workforce that is required by industries, especially in the Samalaju Industrial Park in Bintulu. He said vocational and technical schools should be given importance for the same reason.

Nevertheless, he was against the government’s plan to convert two institutes of teacher education into vocational schools because this would endanger the objective of a 90:10 ratio of Sarawak and non-Sarawak teachers serving in the state. He wanted additional resources, not replacements.

CM also promised that the Sarawak government would support the formation of English-medium mission and private schools that prioritised education in the world’s lingua franca.

We sincerely hope to see CM’s successor continue his fight for quality English education as the way to enhance Sarawak’s economy. ■

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Holistic policy on foreign labour needed

Commentaries on a coherent foreign labour policy have again emerged in the last few weeks. The common consensus is that Malaysia does require foreign workers, but there needs to be a holistic policy that has certainty to enable planning by employers. It should also be consistent as flip-flops are costly to businesses.

The policy should be for the longer term to ensure labour supports sustainable economic growth. Recent measures on foreign labour, especially for unskilled workers, have been ad hoc. Protests by employers against the uncertainty of implementation have led to the policy measures being announced and then deferred.

The substantial growth of foreign unskilled labour has raised concerns that it would lead to a low-wage culture and a low purchasing power syndrome, which has longer-term implications on gross domestic product growth. Studies also show that foreign labour is only positive for long-term economic growth when the labour force is educated and skilled. When foreign labour is skilled, it complements the local labour. When foreign labour is unskilled, it tends to substitute the local labour.

Indeed, migrant workers do fill a gap, especially in dirty, dangerous and difficult jobs that are shunned by Malaysians. However, low skills and low wages have proved detrimental to economic growth prospects through the perpetuation of low productivity. Policymakers agree that foreign unskilled labour should be upscaled to labour with a higher level of skills over time, and with the appropriate combination of equipment, machinery and technology to raise productivity.

But employers, now accustomed to cheap labour, will resist measures that aim to ease dependence on unlimited, unskilled and low-wage foreign labour. This has been seen in several measures in recent periods that had been pulled back because of strong employer lobbying. While commendable measures under the Employer Mandatory Commitment (EMC) — such as making employers accountable for the

payment of foreign worker levies — by themselves will not resolve the adverse economic consequences of the current foreign labour policy, the measure should be allowed to proceed next year. It is an initial step in a range of measures that will address the foreign labour issue.

Meanwhile, the government should use the period prior to making employers responsible for levies, to formulate a more comprehensive policy and ecosystem that will incentivise employers to better leverage foreign labour to raise productivity. This move would be consistent with employers’ view that levies alone cannot promote automation. There needs to be a more comprehensive analysis of the overall costs to employers.

The Malaysian Economic Association believes the government can no longer delay putting in place a comprehensive, consistent and holistic policy on foreign unskilled workers. The Malaysian Institute of Economic Research has been pushing for a comprehensive foreign labour policy since the mid-1990s.

The New Economic Model (NEM) identified two basic factors, which are absent in Malaysia, for accelerating growth — workers competing to upgrade their skills to obtain higher wages, and firms seeing an increasing need for skilled workers to raise their productivity. It appears that employers prefer to continue operating with a readily available pool of foreign workers and underpriced resources to generate profits.

However, employers should not be solely blamed for the phenomenon. The ecosystem does not support the move towards a skilled labour market. In fact, the ecosystem and the government delivery of public services relevant to labour perpetuate the proliferation of cheap labour in the marketplace. There are also inadequate incentives, fiscal or otherwise, to encour-



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BY LATIFAH MERICAN
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age firms to raise productivity, with a better balance of use of capital and skilled labour. Furthermore, the level of competition is not developed enough for firms to increase their dependence on equipment, machinery and technology and pay higher wages.

The NEM — and subsequently the 11th Malaysia Plan — has made a strong pitch for developing a quality workforce and reducing dependence on foreign labour. Specific measures to reduce foreign labour were recommended.

More importantly, the environment necessary to create a competitive labour market should be developed to drive productivity. These require addressing issues from education and the reskilling of existing labour (including foreign labour already in Malaysia) to removing distortions in the labour market, which are constraining wage growth. The 11th Malaysia Plan went further, by requiring a limit on foreign labour to no more than 15% of total labour. The ratio is currently estimated at around 43%.

Calls for a comprehensive policy on foreign labour also come from the concern that ad hoc measures to address short-term issues will create unintended consequences, which could be more problematic over the longer term. Many quarters, including employers, would like to see a comprehensive labour strategy that can serve Malaysia’s economic needs over the long term and support a well-functioning competitive labour market, including an appropriate mix of local and foreign labour of different grades of skills.

The formulation of this strategy must involve employers. They are able to provide input on practicality as well as guidance on the necessary initial conditions that will need to be established for the different range of measures to be successful and achieve their objectives.

There have been many valuable targets suggested by the industry, which should be considered in the labour strategy. Employers are most concerned about a labour crunch emerging if a policy to reduce foreign labour is not implemented carefully and in consultation with them. Part of the strategy on foreign workers must address the regulations and processes for engaging these workers. Since Malaysia began recruiting foreign labour, employers have repeatedly called for foreign workers to be allowed to stay for longer durations. This will reduce the cost of training them while enabling the workers to move up the skill and wage ladder.

Concerns about citizenship issues can be managed to achieve a balance between foreign labour being able to stay long enough to increase their skills — which would benefit the overall labour cost management of employers — and other sociopolitical issues. Other advantages of longer stays should also be considered. They include foreign labour’s savings maintained in Malaysia and lower remittances abroad as well as the impact on the housing market.

More certainty on a longer duration of stay will change the scenario of foreign labour input, leading to a competitive, market driven labour market. A foreign labour policy that aims to only source cheap unskilled labour through a constant flow of new unskilled workers, which leads to a low-income workforce, is not sustainable for long-term productivity growth. It is also in conflict with realising a stronger growth trajectory through moving up the value chain.

On the recruitment of foreign labour, the government needs to respond to employers’ calls for a viable system that is efficient and that ensures corrupt practices will not occur. In this regard, suggestions for a one-stop foreign workers recruitment authority were proposed. This authority would regulate and enforce non-compliance with foreign worker policies.

Regulations on foreign workers must observe standards of best practices and employers must be under surveillance to comply with these stand-

Learning to love a multipolar world

American foreign policy is at a crossroads. The US has been an expanding power since its start in 1789. It battled its way across North America in the 19th century and gained global dominance in the second half of the 20th century. But now, facing China's rise, India's dynamism, Africa's soaring populations and economic stirrings, Russia's refusal to bend to its will, its own inability to control events in the Middle East and Latin America's determination to be free of its de facto hegemony, US power has reached its limits.

One path for the US is global cooperation. The other is a burst of militarism in response to frustrated ambitions. The future of the US and of the world hangs on this choice.

Global cooperation is doubly vital. Only cooperation can deliver peace and the escape from a useless, dangerous and ultimately bankrupting new arms race, this time including cyber-weapons, space weapons and next-generation nuclear weapons. And only cooperation can enable humanity to face up to urgent planetary challenges, including the destruction of biodiversity, the poisoning of the oceans and the threat posed by global warming to the world's food supply, vast drylands and heavily populated coastal regions.

Yet, global cooperation means the willingness to reach agreements with other countries, not simply make unilateral demands of them. And the US is in the habit of making demands, not making compromises. When a state feels destined to rule — as with ancient Rome, the Chinese "Middle Kingdom" centuries ago, the British Empire from 1750 to 1950 and the US since World War II — compromise is hardly a part of

its political vocabulary. As former US president George W Bush succinctly put it, "You're either with us or against us."

Not surprisingly, then, the US is finding it hard to accept the clear global limits that it is confronting. In the wake of the Cold War, Russia was supposed to fall in line, but President Vladimir Putin did not oblige. Likewise, rather than bringing stability on US terms, America's covert and overt wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya, South Sudan and elsewhere created a firestorm stretching across the greater Middle East.

China was supposed to show gratitude and deference to the US for the right to catch up from 150 years of abuse by Western imperial powers and Japan. Instead, China has the audacity to think that it is an Asian power with responsibilities of its own.

There is a fundamental reason, of course, for these limits. At World War II's end, the US was the only major power not destroyed by the war. It led the world in science, technology and infrastructure. It constituted perhaps 30% of the world economy and formed the cutting edge of every high-tech sector. It organised the post-war international order: the United Nations, the Bretton Woods institutions, the Marshall Plan, the reconstruction of Japan and more.

Under that order, the rest of the world has closed much of the vast technological, educational and infrastructural gap with the US. As economists say, global growth has been "convergent",



ECONOMICS AND Justice

BY JEFFREY SACHS

meaning that poorer countries have been catching up. The share of the world economy represented by the US has declined by roughly half (to around 16% currently). China now has a larger economy in absolute terms than the US, though still only around one-fourth the size in per capita terms.

None of this catching up was a perfidious trick against the US or at its expense. It was a matter of basic economics: Given peace, trade and a global flow of ideas, poorer countries can get ahead. This tendency is to be welcomed, not shunned.

But if the global leader's mindset is one of domination, the results of catch-up growth will look threatening, which is how many US "security strategists" view them. Suddenly, open trade, long

championed by the US, looks like a dire threat to its continued dominance. Fearmongers are calling for the US to close itself off to Chinese goods and Chinese companies, claiming that global trade itself undermines American supremacy.

My former Harvard colleague and leading US diplomat Robert Blackwill and former State Department adviser Ashley Tellis expressed their unease in a report published last year. The US has consistently pursued a grand strategy "focused on acquiring and maintaining pre-eminent power over various rivals", they wrote, and "primacy ought to remain the central objective of US grand strategy in the 21st century". But "China's rise

thus far has already bred geopolitical, military, economic and ideological challenges to US power, US allies and the US-dominated international order", Blackwill and Tellis noted. "Its continued, even if uneven, success in the future would further undermine US national interests."

US president-elect Donald Trump's newly named trade adviser Peter Navarro agrees. "Whenever we buy products made in China," he wrote last year of the US and its allies, "we as consumers are helping to finance a Chinese military build-up that may well mean to do us and our countries harm."

With just 4.4% of the world's population and a falling share of world output, the US might try to hang on to its delusion of global dominance through a new arms race and protectionist trade policies. Doing so would unite the world against US arrogance and the new US military threat. The US would sooner rather than later bankrupt itself in a classic case of "imperial overreach".

The only sane way forward for the US is vigorous and open global cooperation to realise the potential of 21st-century science and technology to slash poverty, disease and environmental threats. A multipolar world can be stable, prosperous and secure. The rise of many regional powers is not a threat to the US, but an opportunity for a new era of prosperity and constructive problem solving.

— Project Syndicate

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ards. These regulations must include strict rules on foreign labour recruitment, beyond the imposition of levies on employers. Unrelated to the proposal of a single foreign labour authority, there are suggestions for the Immigration Department to be solely and directly accountable for foreign labour entries, without any outsourcing, to avoid abuse and corruption.

The strategy for reducing dependence on foreign labour calls for appropriate incentives to increase automation. The incentives could include a reward system for the progressive reduction in the employment of low-skilled foreign labour, especially for small and medium enterprises and the services sector. An overriding issue that is fundamental to a coherent strategy on reducing dependency on foreign labour is having accurate statistics on the workers. A reporting system is necessary to ensure data that is current and reliable to support good policies.

Malaysia's economic growth is dependent on the quality of its workforce, and this applies also to the foreign labour recruitment policy and foreign labour skills development. This means that the foreign labour policy must go beyond a policy on recruitment. It must be part of the overall strategy for a well-functioning competitive labour market with enough incentives to increase capital investments to support higher productivity of labour.

A holistic strategy for the development of Malaysia's labour market in the long term is long overdue. Developing a strategy with employers as a business plan partner can reduce implementation errors and ensure objectives are achieved.

A labour market strategy that can achieve the objectives of a high-income economy must leverage foreign labour. Building a quality labour force hinges on skills development, including the skills of foreign labour. It requires the use of modern equipment, machinery and technology. Components of this strategy have been outlined in the NEM and the 11th Malaysia Plan. These should be revisited, and the implementation of a comprehensive labour market reform should not be delayed any further. ■

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Social media postings a boon for graft busters

Kim Kardashian is ever present on social media. But she was silent for three months after she was burglarised in a Paris hotel room. The burglars took off with millions of dollars worth of jewellery.

Early this month, she made her long-awaited return to social media — much to the delight of her thousands of fans the world over.

Kardashian is a class act as far as maximising social media goes, using the various platforms available to her advantage. Her presence on Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat and Facebook has boosted her star billing. Her profile is so high that she has raked in millions in TV deals, commercials, appearances and what not.

But her social media blitz has attracted the wrong kind of people as well. It is said the burglars came to know of the jewellery she had in her hotel room via her posts on social media platforms.

In Malaysia, social media postings are drawing the attention of the "good guys" — the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC).

MACC says social media has become its source of information in tracking down "ill-gotten wealth".

Hence, civil servants and their families who flaunt expensive holidays abroad and luxury items on Facebook and Instagram risk courting the commission's attention.

According to MACC deputy chief commissioner for operations, Datuk Azam Bari, while it is not a crime for civil servants and their families to own luxury handbags and watches, "having one too many Hermès, Chanel or Louis Vuitton bags will raise eyebrows and suspicion as to the source of their wealth".

"If civil servants or their family members are having more than a dozen and flaunt them, then we would like to know where they got the money to buy them," he said.

Based on what MACC said, we can expect the graft buster to look beyond or rather above civil servants and their families. We can, right? We can expect MACC to take a look at ministers and members of parliament, too.

You see, ministers, deputy ministers, MPs and their families are said to be fond of displaying their wealth via social media platforms, with Instagram and Facebook being their favourites.

For example, postings of a fleet of expensive luxury cars and expensive watches said to belong to the son of a federal minister can be seen often on Instagram and Facebook. He posted them himself.

The teenage son of another minister thanked his father on Instagram for brand-ed shoes costing at least RM5,000 per pair.

Then there are the photographs of a minister and his family vacationing in Europe, including cruising on a yacht off the coast of Greece.

There are also Instagram postings of the wife of an MP showing the entire family on frequent holidays in Asia and Europe featuring fine dining and shopping sprees.

There are many more — all on social media for all to see. It is just a click away, so to speak.



THE Writest Things

BY MOHSIN ABDULLAH

I am not accusing anybody of anything here. There is nothing wrong for ministers, deputy ministers, MPs and their families to go on expensive holidays abroad and to own luxury goods.

But as Azam has said, flaunting wealth can attract MACC's attention and raise questions among the public. Do you not agree?

Transparency Malaysia president Datuk Akhbar Satar certainly thinks so. In his response via WhatsApp, Akhbar said: "The MACC can and should investigate ministers or anybody, for that matter. If they suspect [there is an] element of corruption, they should open investigation papers and probe for evidence."

Recently, the international media reported that the Thai authorities are considering the death penalty in some corruption cases — for example, officials convicted of corruption involving more than one billion baht (about RM126 million) would face death by lethal injection.

The story was picked up by local news organisations, in particular, the online media. And the responses of Malaysians online are as expected — lots of sarcasm which I do not intend to repeat here.

But in a nutshell, based on the comments, Malaysians want more to be done in the fight against graft. And this should come about without fear or favour. ■

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