

Racing to accomplish vision 2020 goal

By Tan Sri Rastam Mohd Isa

FINAL STRETCH: *Having set an exemplary direction for the region, it would be a pity if Malaysia didn't achieve its own target*

THE year 2015 began with Malaysia assuming the Asean chairmanship. Malaysia had the responsibility of steering Asean towards the establishment of the Asean Community. There was certainly a lot of hype attached to and media coverage focused on the Asean chairmanship, although Malaysia was active elsewhere on the international scene, including as a member of the United Nations Security Council. This is understandable. Asean is closer to home and the chairman was none other than the prime minister himself.

A lot of work was done by ministers, officials and the business community under Malaysia's leadership to bring the Asean Community into being, culminating in the adoption of the Declaration on the Asean Community and the Asean Community Vision 2025 at the 27th Asean Summit in November.

Malaysia had chosen the theme of "Our People, Our Community, Our Vision" to mark its chairmanship. In general, the Malaysian chairmanship was judged as very successful.

We are now on the eve of 2016. Asean will start moving forward as a community from 2016. Further work needs to be done to consolidate recent gains and achieve the objectives of the Asean Community Vision 2025.

The advent of 2016 would also mean that Malaysia would be four years away from achieving our own Vision 2020, first unveiled by then prime minister Datuk Seri (now Tun) Dr Mahathir Mohamad at the inaugural meeting of the Malaysian Business Council on Feb 28, 1991.

The main thrust of this vision is that Malaysia should achieve developed country status in its own mould by the year 2020. Dr Mahathir had outlined nine central strategic challenges for Malaysia to overcome in order to achieve Vision 2020.

Dr Mahathir's vision for Malaysia was welcomed not only in this country but also became the inspiration for so many other vision 2020s around the world. Indeed, Asean adopted its own Vision 2020 in 1997.

Many countries, cities and municipalities, international organisations, associations, universities and companies have set specific targets to achieve their own vision by 2020. It would be an embarrassment if they met their targets and we didn't.

Lately, Dr Mahathir has increasingly expressed his view that Malaysia will not be able to achieve Vision 2020 by the target date. He has placed much of the blame for this possible failure on the country's leadership that came after him.

Could that be entirely true? After all, an awful lot of things have happened since 1991. The world has undergone tremendous change. Malaysia herself has had to adapt to those changes even when Dr Mahathir was Prime Minister. We have been able to cope with some, but would need to work hard on others.

Datuk Seri Najib Razak, since becoming prime minister, has emphasised the New Economic Model and the goal of achieving high-income status by the year 2020, while keeping to the main objectives of Vision 2020. He has recently urged that discussions begin soon on charting the country's course post-2020, first at the Umno general assembly and a few days later at a dinner hosted by the Malaysian Administrative and Diplomatic Service Association on Dec 14

It is indeed most appropriate that discussions be held soon and in earnest on Vision 2020. I would suggest that those discussions begin with the major questions of what we have achieved so far, and what we should do for the remaining years before 2020. We need to identify current shortcomings and assess what is achievable in the coming four years, while venturing to look into the future beyond 2020.

To start off, it may be worthwhile to follow the spirit of the theme that Malaysia chose for its Asean chairmanship. With a slight twist, we can call it "Our People, Our Nation, Our Vision". This theme should serve as the anchor for the national discourse and not merely for sloganeering.

A national level consultation process with the involvement of stakeholders nationwide should be instituted to address all issues of concern and importance. Discussions involving the government, private sector, think tanks, academia and civil society organisations should focus on, -but not necessarily be limited to, issues such as level of political maturity; national unity and integration; ethnic relations; economic development, opportunities and growth; improvement in the quality of life; knowledgeable society based on quality education; social justice and cohesion; good governance; religious tolerance and freedom; high spiritual and moral values, and national dignity and confidence.

Malaysia has achieved a lot to bring us to where we are today. But, we are in danger of not moving as fast as others. We are ahead of many other developing countries in public service delivery, for instance. The government's Government Transformation Programme and Economic Transformation Programme have achieved commendable results.

But, there are many areas where we need to improve to move up the development and income ladder. For instance, right now we are still behind Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam, and even Sri Lanka, in terms of Internet speeds and penetration.

The Kuala Lumpur taxi service is less superior to Jakarta's. Our general attitude towards public toilets and our road manners remain a major problem. These are but some of the factors that need to be taken into consideration in the national discourse as part of the ongoing effort to change Malaysian mindsets and attitudes.

There needs to be a clear agenda set right away. Those who are willing to criticise are numerous. But this is not the time to simply gripe and blame the government. Malaysia's best minds need to come together for the purpose of forging a national consensus. We need people who can provide rational advice as to what needs to be done in the next four years to achieve Vision 2020 and to move on thereafter.

Vision 2020 is not just about income and the economy. Having gone so far and achieved so much in the last 50 years, this country that we love cannot be allowed to stagnate in the trap of middle income and closed mindset. For this, both the government and the people have to work together. All have a stake in the country's future.

The writer is the Chairman and chief executive of the Institute of Strategic and International Studies Malaysia