Adapting to a crowded city

By Dr Hezri Adnan

URBAN GOVERNANCE: 'Heartware' is as important as hardware

For some, lunch hour is best spent working rather than queuing to find a parking spot. Driving back home is equally challenging.

For those staying outside the city centre, their evening commute after work is distressingly slow. And it is getting slower by the day.

For most, the longer trip times are an unavoidable fact of life. Such a sense of crowding is, however, shaped by our experience on the roads. But is Kuala Lumpur really that crowded, physically?

In 2012, Southeast Asia's megacities of Jakarta and Manila clocked a whopping population of 26 million and 22 million, respectively. By far, the world's densest urban areas are on the Indian subcontinent. Dhaka's density is 44,400 people per square kilometre.

By comparison, the Kuala Lumpur region last year has an estimated population of 7.58 million with an urban density of 3,400 per square kilometre.

It seems from these figures Malaysians have very little reason to complain about crowding; apart from the increasing density of cars on our roads, that is. The growing sense of crowding may also be psychological since we are new to the phenomenon.

Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah and Sarawak were only sparsely populated before the colonial intervention.

In contrast, the flood plains of Thailand and Myanmar, or the fertile volcanic soils of Java, have gradually developed a substantial population density since earlier periods.

The population of Malaysia multiplied in the order of 11 times over the past 110 years. Most nations in Southeast Asia recorded only around seven times multiplication.

Kuala Lumpur in particular has experienced strong growth since the last century.

Its residents more than doubled by the 1980s from a mere 900,000 population in 1950.

With more economic opportunities in the following three decades, the population in Kuala Lumpur's core and suburbs in 2010 had tripled from its 1980s level.

By 2030, it is estimated that Kuala Lumpur will be home to anywhere from 8.7 to 10 million people.

Do we have the right state of mind to live side-by-side with 10 million people?

Some signs suggest that the city dwellers have yet to develop sufficient adaptation capacities to live in a high-density environment.

One example is the public nuisance of double-parking in the city and its suburbs.

Few things get the blood boiling than being blocked by a car without a driver in it. It has gotten to the point of people double-parking in front of empty spaces to avoid getting parked in. While most of us

Heavy rain falling in Kuala Lumpur city centre recently. Some signs suggest that cite dwellers have yet to develop sufficient adaptation capacities to live in a high-density environment. AFP pic

suffer the scourge of double-parkers in frustrated silence, others have resorted to aggressive behaviour.

While charting the way forward for realising the investments in the Greater Kuala Lumpur, we must be mindful of the pathology of high-density living.

The impact of crowding on social behaviour needs better understanding.

In many dense cities, social life of a population is disintegrated and replaced by maladies such as increased anxiety, mental disorder, family break-ups, crime and violence. A balanced approach involves complementing infrastructure or "hardware" improvements with the cultivation of collective ethics or "heartware".

High urban density is tolerable only if civility and regulations mediate social relations in the city. Managing common resources, such as streets, parks and rivers, requires manners that maximise the gain for all and not individuals.

The polite ways of Japanese motorists, for instance, circumvent the problem of on-the-road driving anger. Such self-control lubricates the frictions of urban space.

The alternative is regulation for formal social control of anti-collective behaviour in crowded urban ecosystems. Many modern cities, for example, have introduced measures such as drive-time restriction for cars.

Kuala Lumpur City Hall on its part must also modernise its regulations to maintain social order in line with the changing times.

This may involve reforming the penalty system for strict compliance with the law. If we are serious about ensuring Kuala Lumpur's status as a livable city, we must not shy away from making unpopular decisions where necessary.

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