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## ***Will special interest groups hurt Malaysia?***

**DANGER:** Small groups of parochial politicians, bureaucrats and businessmen can hold their countries hostage and block economic reforms that benefit the masses



*Once **special interest groups** become large and dominant, their interests and survival depend on **acting in concert with others** and not in rivalry with them.*

IF there is one thing that is guaranteed to sink Malaysia, derail all its grand plans and leave it broken and rudderless, it is stubbornness and insular self-interest.

This brand of self-interest is not just highly toxic but quite virulent. It is seen in violent and not-so-violent conflicts and struggles around the world today;

But special interest groups exist everywhere and not just this country, you splutter. The idea of a pluralistic, moderate and give-and-take, society is an unattainable ideal, you claim.

Even if moderation were possible, it is supposedly trumped by some religious law or overriding goal. Who gets to say what this religious law or overriding goal exactly is? In most cases, it is by the majority or a powerful inside minority.

As a political wag observed, democracy is "three wolves and a lamb voting on what to have for lunch". Yet you and I know full well that this is not how things have to work in this day and age.

If it did, multicultural countries like Malaysia would not have coalesced let alone prospered. If the strong simply took what they could, we would be living either in a capitalist dystopia (think *Mad Max*) or a Marxian utopia.

More than ever, governments today cannot do just as they like. There are laws, institutions of wise, moral and incorruptible people and the court of international opinion to contend with.

In an age of unprecedented transparency, the social media reports analyse every (alleged) decision and action, and in real time, too.

Critics, both in this country and elsewhere, however, do have a point; quite a few of them actually. Righteous laws have, and are being, subverted. The integrity of institutions has been eroded.

Leaders are selected for office on the basis of their loyalties and not competencies. Policies channel resources for ostensibly noble reasons but are totally ineffective in outcomes.

Public funds are used to buy support or, alternatively, pay off the disgruntled. Where the law is enforced, it is done selectively and prejudicially.

A sure indication that a country is seriously off-kilter is when the law does not apply to all fairly and equally.

When countries get into this situation, they seem incapable of making the simplest rational decisions, let alone moral decisions. Virtually everything is sacrificed on the altar of either political interest or expediency.

A financial crisis may erupt, for example, but the solution is to deny and suppress information concerning it rather than deal with it pragmatically. Indeed, pragmatic actions get to be in short supply.

Small groups of parochial politicians, bureaucrats and businessmen can hold their countries hostage and block economic reforms that benefit the masses many times more.

Such bleak conclusions may seem hopeless and inescapable. Twenty years ago though, I came across one of the personal life-changing masterpieces that reshaped my world view.

It was a book by the late Professor Mancur Olson of Harvard University entitled *The Logic of Collective Action*.

(If anyone from the ruling coalition cares to do so, they may find a very cogent explanation as to why their political parties are the way they are. I also see sharp applications in current regional geopolitics.)

My takeaway from Olson is that large (apex) special interest groups do not have the same interests as they did when they were smaller and, therefore, cannot align and behave like smaller ones.

According to Olson, once special interest groups become large and dominant, their interests and survival depend on acting in concert with others and not in rivalry with them.

Many members though will become disaffected and fall away to start smaller competing groups. This is because as it grows in size, many members will not feel that they benefit proportionately in power or benefits.

Does this sound familiar?

They will thus leave to form smaller pressure groups to alternatively harangue, compete, threaten or promise cooperation with their former parent.

This does not necessarily impede the ability of the large special interest group to operate, merely complicates it. If it adeptly stays the course, the greater good can still be achieved.

The thing is that it must reject the strident demands of small insular lobbies. It must act, despite the pressures, fairly and unequivocally.

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