

UMNO International Forum
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1. I feel immensely honoured and utterly thrilled to attend this panel of the UMNO international forum. It is extremely rare for a bureaucrat to be invited to any meeting of any political party in my home country. First, bureaucrats are expected to exhibit political neutrality, which is correct. Secondly, politicians feel they are more intelligent and better informed than bureaucrats, which one could argue is not always the case. Thirdly, perhaps, politicians do not like us, which I think is always the case! Joking aside, your invitation created in myself a ripple of surprise as well as appreciation.

2. The subject is highly intriguing, “Realising the Potential of the Growing Power of People’s Voice”. It has never been so timelier to discuss this theme than it is today. Under globalisation, political management faces challenges and dilemma. In nowhere else in East Asia is this subject more pertinent than in Malaysia. Malaysia is now standing at the gate to enter into the cadre of developed countries by 2020.

3. No escapisms is recommended. We all should face up the reality and should not escape from it. First, people are better informed, including through a variety of media, than before. Secondly, people are far better educated through wider spread higher educations than before. Confucius advised a ruler in China, “You should not inform people, but simply make people rely on you.” This can no longer be a sustainable policy nor a guiding principle in the modern political system. Thirdly, people avail themselves with a variety of means of exchanges of views. They are far more seamlessly interconnected than before, facilitated by technological advancement. Their sphere of communications are not limited to those with their neighbours in the same towns or cities, but have already expanded nationwide or even beyond national borders. They meet through video conferences, skypes, and WhatsApp’s. They are neither alone nor separate. They do not have to come to conference centres or congregation rooms.

4. Fourthly, people have greater inclination to convey their views freely and instantaneously, and to have their voices heard not only by those whom they know in person but by unspecified large numbers, through blogs or twitters. The more eager people become to engage with unknown general public, the more people will be rallied, and the bigger power their movement can gain. Fifthly, people are already used to such freedom of speech. Any intentional restrictions would invite violent reactions from them. More than any time in recent history, governments in every corner of the world are confronted with assertive citizens.

5. “Do we realise the Potential of the Growing Power of People’s Voice?” Yes, we do. Like it or not, we are compelled to realise it. Could we reverse this trend? Definitely, no. Should we do so? Is this situation worrisome? Is this reality in the wrong direction? Must we reverse this trend? Answers to these questions seems all negative. But supposing you are asked whether you should *laissez-faire* this momentum with no attempt to control the speed, some may raise reservation. “Can you cycle down a slope on a bicycle with no brake, allowing the speed to accelerate freely?”

6. Today, let me discuss this subject with some references to experiences of Japan, and address the theme in question by sharing them with you.

7. The first experience I raise is on environmental protection. In the post-war period of rebuilding Japan out of devastation, our government placed priority to economic revitalisation and reindustrialisation. This was inevitable, but it did not take time before problems surfaced: Natural environment fiercely degraded; Coastal seas and rivers contaminated; atmosphere polluted; living creatures intoxicated, including people.

8. In one city, unregulated release of methyl mercury in wastewater from chemical factories sank into fish in the nearby coastal water, and caused local people eating fish to suffer from ataxia, muscle weakness or paralysis, even creating deformed babies. In another city, the burning of petroleum and crude oil by petrochemical processing facilities and refineries emitted large quantities of sulphur oxide in the atmosphere, resulting in asthma in the local population.

9. In the midst of industrialisation, both local and central governments were slow to evaluate the problem to respond swiftly, while voices of people surfaced not only from the affected regions but also from all over Japan. Vox populi finally appeared massively, and pushed the government not only to take fiercely corrective measures for these specific cases, but more generally to implement a series of strict environmental regulations without delay. Thanks to the voices, everywhere in Japan, blue sky reappearing, rivers resuming transparency, the mountains reshaped and the nature reshining. These are favourable examples of people's voice ameliorating the government policy priorities.

10. The targets of assertive vox populis in Japan have not been limited to the administrative branch alone, but to the legislature and the judicial branch. A number of members of parliament have been accused for bribery cases. Certain prosecutors have also been labelled as inhumanely severe interrogators. Voices have also been targeted at influential non-public organisations, including the media. A big newspaper company was recently condemned for its fabricated misleading articles by a strong voice of the public, ending in the resignation of its CEO. Voice of the people shed light to invisible or covert corners of the society and propose improvements.

11. Traditionally, diplomacy tended to be interpreted as an area reserved for exclusive management and control by the government. In the past, foreign policy refused to be susceptible to any intervention from voices of people, even from the parliament. It is partly because this area was considered as falling under the authority of the sovereign. It may be partly because there was a need to protect the national interest from foreign interventions through voices of the people. In 20th and 21st centuries, however, foreign policy started to open its door to voices of the public. Our government also experienced changes of its foreign policy approaches, corresponding to the growing public demand. One example was that voices of the families of abductees victimised by North Korea mounted so fervently that the government shifted its policy approaches from a quiet diplomacy or a behind-the-scene diplomacy to an open diplomacy. Similar trends can be seen in foreign policy makings in other countries, where their governments are compelled to act upon their influences, rightly or wrongly.

12. In the field of humanitarian assistance, disaster reliefs, or human rights protection, a number of so-called international non-governmental organisations have been developed, actively engaging all around the world. Moving beyond the national borders, civil society is now breaking through a new horizon. Those groups are capable of delivering aid to places where the government on its own may find it difficult to reach. It appears in Malaysia that voices of international NGOs are found imposing powerful influences on policy priorities, particularly in forest preservation or in human rights

protection. Many NGOs are pointing out problems correctly and indicating good suggestions. One might, however, say that a few could be suggesting solutions, while representing business interests elsewhere and pushing through their hidden agenda. Quite naturally, it is sometimes well-advised to cast cautious eyes on them.

13. Now from the need for bureaucratic neutrality, it should be fair to mention certain cases where one could rebut in saying that voices of people might in some cases misguide the state to somewhat a cumbersome direction, harming the national interest and impairing the national strength.

14. One of the cases often referred to as a contentious example, is the resumption of nuclear power plants in Japan. All the 50 some plants have had to remain halted since the tsunami hit four of them located side by side in Fukushima. The resounding voice of people opposing the resumption of operation imposed heavy political pressure on the governors and mayors of local municipalities where the plants are located, who all had hesitated only until recently to give consent to resuming operations.

15. Our electricity reliance upon nuclear power plants has exceeded 30%. Electricity bill, pushed up, has been weighing heavily upon our households and industry across the whole nation. The plants are the outcome of advanced technologies. The remaining plants are newer and with better safety facilities, than those hit in Fukushima. They are installed on much higher ground and safer from future tsunami attacks. The very four plants when hit by the earthquake stopped operation safely, and would not have caused problem if not inundated by tsunami water. Whether we should put trust on modern science and technology or we should follow general sentiment of people is a serious policy challenge for modern democratic states.

16. While one might have reservations to such voices to stop all the nuclear power plants, one certainly admired the public voices calling for offering big helping hands for the victims hit by the earthquake and tsunami all along the Tohoku Region. We all realised the potential of the growing power of people's benevolent voices in Japan. Many of our citizens voluntarily came out from their comfort zone in other part of Japan, and joined the government's rescue efforts. This should be a reflection of a strong sense of public and communal spirit among our citizens. Some even sacrificed their lives when helping others. Despite in the sheer despair, their devotion and dedication gave us hopes. Every time we measure the capacity of people to meet a challenge, we are reminded that their capacity may well be limitless.

17. Through such experiences, we realised the potential of the growing power of people's devotion and contribution to the public good. Voice is important, but action is equally or more valuable than a mere voice. Not only do we expect the public to voice demand for the government to take certain actions, they should also take direct actions by themselves to address the problem and rectify the situation. They can join words and acts together for an action. In natural disaster, before governments take required actions, people on the ground can respond by themselves promptly and flexibly, and with their high manoeuvrability, they can react effectively to emergency challenges when they arise.

18. We ourselves sometimes wonder how such became possible. In cities and towns in Japan, there are a number of neighbourhood communities, consisting some 30-100 families. Each household send the senior member to the community assembly to discuss any issues related to the community. This system dates back to about 500 years ago.

Owing to this system, residents know each other very well, help one another, and are not indifferent to each other. Any problem related to the sanity, safety, water coming out of community wells, garbage, and sewage shall be discussed and settled by themselves.

19. One example of this system is fire-warning teams formed by the community small children. They take turns walking around the communal neighbourhood in the evening, and calling for fire precaution, saying “grilling fish is fine, but do not bake your house!” If any urgent problem emerges, the community’s youth volunteer firefighting teams, older than children teams, are supposed to take action to extinguish the fire. Another young volunteer group is expected to maintain safety before the local or central government start dealing with problems.

20. Senior community members have brought up children and youth under such a long established system and instructed them how to assume responsibility and to help each other. This tradition of neighbourhood associations all around Japan have trained our youth to play responsible roles in case of emergency anywhere in our country. It also helped our citizens to nurture public leadership and a sense of ownership in their respective communities and over the whole nation. The growing potential power of action of the public is stalwart and promising, indeed. Our government encourages the civic engagement practiced by its citizens. Our citizens in general are willing to serve to the public good.

21. Before concluding my remarks, let me go back the history to ancient Greece. Aristotle, a Greek philosopher, is said to express: “To take no part in the running of the community's affairs is to be either a beast or a god”. In Athens, a person's public life was not separated from his private life. Citizens were both ruler and ruled. All citizens had the right to speak and vote in the political assembly. For Aristotle, the success of a democratic society depends on the quality of its citizens. He argued that citizens have an obligation to cultivate their power of reason and participate in the life of their community. He also believed that, in doing so, citizens can develop and exercise their civic virtues. Even after more than two millennia, his words still have relevance today. I think that this philosophy is more or less shared by Malaysia and Malaysians.

22. The theme in question of this panel has been a long debated subject for a state to be a better state. A nation is not an independent or aloof entity from its nationals, but their aggregate. It is only through the participation of well-informed and responsible citizens that we can build a better nation, capable of providing its members with good quality of life and responding to inside and outside challenges swiftly and adequately.