

RSOG Seminar

Assessing the Look East Policy and Its Impact : 30 Years Afer

with

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When : 9 July 2015
Where : Razak School of Government
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About The Seminar

The Look East Policy (LEP), implemented in 1982, could be seen as one of the many reasons why Malaysia achieved commendable growth and economic progress in the early 1990s. The ethos such as patriotism, discipline, competent management system, work ethics, and close cooperation between the Government and private sector illustrated in Japan was seen as something worth emulating in a country that was transitioning from agriculture to industrialisation. More than 30 years on, it is worth assessing what impact it may have had to the nation, especially as Malaysia is aiming to go a step further in its development status and as it strengthens the relationship through the continuation of LEP 2.0. A closer look on the policy, particularly its rationale, formation and formulation, will be discussed in depth. Broadly, the benefits and drawbacks of the policy and its approach will also be highlighted. More importantly, the understanding of and impact of meta-policy (policy of making policies), using LEP as an example, is crucial to policymakers and implementers. Insights from the LEP would not only strengthen the strategic partnerships between Malaysia and Japan, but also what roles and influence they can play at multilateral organisations towards common good.

Summary

The Look East Policy (LEP) is the government's vision to emulate the development practices and culture of the East, pioneered by Tun Mahathir Mohamad in 1982. To understand the LEP, Dr. Kartini first stressed the importance of understanding public policy, which is a choice made by government for the benefit of the state. According to William Jenkins, public policy is a process that must also include other non-state actors.

More importantly, the formulation of public policy must look into previous policy. However, LEP is a unique in a sense that there was no preceding policy to develop upon.

As with any policy, the decision and implementation processes can be considered from the top-down, bottom-up, and hybrid perspectives. For LEP, it was largely a top-down policy where the government solely decided on the policy for its perceived benefit to the country. The top-down argument for the LEP included: i) national agenda; ii) political mileage and preference; iii) resource mobilization; iv) nationalism; and v) plural society and social cohesion. These factors rationalised the objective of policy, which was essentially to emulate the success of Japan in rebuilding its society and economy after the devastation it suffered after World War II.

In strengthening the LEP, past literature points to Japan's substantial role in providing financial aid and rescue packages to help Malaysia out of the Asian Financial Crisis in the 90s. It also points to the misalignment of Japanese – Malaysia cultures. In her research, Dr. Kartini and her team interviewed 30 Malaysians who had a direct exposure to Japanese culture, among them a student; an employee of Japanese MNC; people working alongside the Japanese; and spouses to Japanese.

Dr Kartini concluded that there are both advantages and disadvantages of the LEP to the nation in terms of work culture and ethics. In general, Malaysians admire Japanese values of integrity and discipline, but dislike the hierarchical form of society that favours wealth and status. Many Malaysians adopt Japan-style high degree of self-discipline, organization, punctuality, and detailed standardized procedures in their work life. However, these values are yet to be practiced to the same degree outside the working environment. Lastly, the LEP may have brought economic and educational development in Malaysia, but technological transfer and development have yet to be developed, with many loopholes and inefficiencies.

What can be done to further enhance the LEP? According to Tun Mahathir Mohamad, there "is the need to establish Japanese higher learning institutions that are fully operated in Malaysia with actual Japanese cultural applications in all aspects of teaching, communicating, researching, and innovating". We should also encourage Malaysian and Japanese SMEs to venture into the Halal goods and services markets in both countries. There is also the need for more research and development projects in Malaysia by Japanese organisations to enhance our technological development. Hopefully the LEP will continue to develop and enrich Malaysia in the long run.

Issued raised

- The implementation of Japanese culture and work ethic is well on its way in many private and public agencies, however its quality is questionable. Employees may practice high degrees of discipline and standardized processes, but may not practice them outside the working environment.

- Cheap labour, market incentives, racial harmony, and relative peace are among the factors that attracted Japanese MNCs to invest in Malaysia.
- Malaysians tend to prefer work-life balance rather than the more career centricity of the Japanese. Thus, some of the Japanese work ethic may not be compatible with Malaysian culture.
- Malaysia is privileged to be a melting pot of various cultures. This is an opportunity for us to take the good of everything for our benefit. Thus, the LEP also needs to consider favourable practices from other states such as Korea, China and Taiwan.

About the Speaker

Dr. Kartini Aboo Talib@Khalid is Senior Lecturer at the School of History, Politics and Strategy Studies and the Senior Research Fellow cum Deputy Director at the Institute of Ethnic Studies (KITA) at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM). Prior to that, she was a Senior Lecturer at Northeastern University and a Fullbright scholar from the year 2000 to 2006. In addition to being grantee of Nauman Stiftung Foundation, where she was a contributing writer for a book project titled "Party Politics in South East Asia" (2010). She was also a recipient of Sumitomo Foundation grant in 2001 and a country consultant for Malaysia to United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and Empowerment for Women 2014.

Contact

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