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Letter to the Editor

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Of Flooded Airports and Broken Toilet Doors: Our National Crisis of 'Dis-governance'

The recent spectacle of our world-class airport terminal knee-deep in floodwater, a chaotic sequel to the perennial breakdown of its aerotrails, was more than just an operational failure. It was a perfect, damning metaphor for the state of our nation. We have become an international laughing stock not for a lack of ambition, but for a fundamental failure in execution. This is not merely bad luck or poor management; it is a systemic disease we must name and confront: **Dis-governance**.

Dis-governance is the systematic breakdown where our institutions, despite their size and budget, fail to provide basic order and services, resulting in administrative paralysis. It is the utter inability of different government silos to coordinate and produce positive outcomes for the citizens. The flooded airport is just the tip of the melting iceberg. Look around: new toll roads that inexplicably create more congestion, immigration boundaries more porous than a teabag, brazen kidnappings in broad daylight, chronic disruptions of water supply, and violence in schools. The list is a depressing litany of a social contract fraying at the edges.

This malaise is felt most acutely where Malaysians live their daily lives. If you reside in one of our many public housing estates, Dis-governance is your daily reality. It is the infuriating sight of rubbish bags perpetually flung from windows and vehicles parked indiscriminately, blocking access for the elderly and persons with disabilities. These are not complex problems. Yet, officials seem tied in impossible bureaucratic knots, unable to implement simple and consistent enforcement. This inability to plan sensibly and enforce basic rules sends a corrosive signal: the system is broken and respect for the law is optional. Is it any surprise, then, that public safety issues and deviant behaviour fester in these neglected spaces?

At the heart of Dis-governance lies a crippling lack of accountability. When nobody is truly responsible for producing outcomes, nobody feels compelled to act. A recent, heartbreakingly perfect example illustrates this: a bank offered a local school resources for improvements. The students themselves identified broken toilet doors as a pressing issue. Yet, despite the funding being available, a solution was stymied by an absurd paralysis. The teachers, the headmaster, and the local education office could not navigate their own internal processes to agree on fixing a few doors. When a child's simple plea for dignity is lost in a labyrinth of inaction, we have moved beyond red tape into a pathology of failure.

How did we get here? Dis-governance is the direct result of a nation that evolved economically, but whose institutions did not. Since independence, our population has grown more than fivefold, and almost 80% of us now live in urban areas. Yet, our governance structures remain ossified, designed for a different time and a different demographic. There is a cavernous mismatch between the public service delivery system and the needs of 21st-century Malaysians.

Our challenges have transformed. We are no longer a nation solely fighting malaria, infant mortality, and illiteracy. Today, our aspirations are about the quality of life in our neighbourhoods, driving innovation, building world-class services, and nurturing happy, healthy families — the very goals of the Madani framework. Yet, we are hamstrung by anachronisms. Parental anxiety over education reform has been an election staple for two decades, yet instead of producing globally competitive graduates, the national conversation is sidetracked by debates over shoe colour and, as we now know, an inability to manage even basic maintenance.

This daily failure to deliver breeds deep public cynicism. The grey area between the existence of rules and the inability to enforce them becomes a fertile breeding ground for corruption. When people see that the system does not work for them, they lose faith. This erodes trust, breeds resentment, and ultimately unravels the social cohesion that holds our nation together.

The government must recognise that this is a systemic problem. It cannot be fixed with piecemeal initiatives or incremental tweaks at the margins. Tinkering with SOPs or announcing one-off committees is like placing a band-aid on a gaping wound. What we need is a serious, courageous, and comprehensive overhaul of the entire system. This requires re-imagining the synergistic roles of the public sector, the private sector, and civil society, empowering them with clarity, accountability, and a singular focus on outcomes. We must dismantle the architecture of Dis-governance and build in its place a system that is agile, accountable, and truly responsive to the people it serves. The floodwaters at our airport have receded, but the tide of public frustration is rising. We must act before we are all submerged.

The ancient wisdom of Confucius rings with a chilling prescience for Malaysia today: **“Unless you change direction, you will end up where you are headed.”** The warning could not be clearer. It is long past time to change our direction.

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