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Johor project and nation-building

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IN FEBRUARY, Johor Chief Minister Abdul Ghani Othman proclaimed that the Johor waterfront and waterway would be rejuvenated once a 'half-bridge' joining Johor Baru and Singapore was built. Much hope was placed on this piece of infrastructure and on the investments that would subsequently flow into the area.

The scrapping of the bridge project in April was thus a disappointment for the Johor Baru region and it became imperative for Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi's administration to come up with an alternative plan.

It seems to have managed this with the launch of the Iskandar Development Region, or IDR, on Nov 4. This project holds much more than the hope of Johor residents that sustained development will now be coming to the state.

The sheer size of the undertaking also shows the hopes of the federal government for it to be the engine for national development over the next 20 years.

As much as RM47 billion (S\$20 billion) is to be invested in the project in the first five years, with investments totalling RM330 billion by the end of the next 15 to 20 years. The financiers will be the federal government, its Khazanah Nasional investment arm, the Employee's Provident Fund and the private sector.

The IDR's level of investment and the ambitions it embodies make it unmistakably a major long-term nation-building strategy. To Datuk Seri Abdullah, the IDR is what the Multimedia Super Corridor - launched in 1995 - was to former premier Mahathir Mohamad.

In that sense, the IDR is Premier Abdullah's weighty reply to Tun Dr Mahathir's claim that the present government has no idea what building a nation entails.

Tun Dr Mahathir's vision to develop a long strip of land stretching across what was once jungle - all the way from Kuala Lumpur to the city's new international airport and encompassing the new cities of Cyberjaya and Putrajaya - to form a grand 'super corridor' now seems to have been overambitious. The idea arguably was to avoid the old centres of growth. This was likely a central point in Tun Dr Mahathir's vision of a modern Malaysian landscape.

The Abdullah administration's refocus on old centres such as Penang and Johor Baru reverses Tun Dr Mahathir's direction and may contribute to a redefinition of Malay progress. Must Malay progress continue to mean clearly definable Malay cities, Malay middle class and Malay-owned corporations, or should it be understood through the success of Malaysia as a whole?

Developing a region right next to Singapore, the richest city in South-east Asia, from which sorely needed spending power and investments can come, makes very good economic sense. In fact, one wonders why it had not been done earlier.

However, the concentration on southern Johor will not be without its own problems, and many of these will stem from internal politicking in the nation's dominant political party, the United Malays National Organisation (Umno). Discord is also to be expected from the fact that federal interests will conflict with local interests, and federal paradigms will conflict with local ones.

Since Singapore's airport and seaport will inevitably be significant gateways for goods and people into the IDR, a senior Khazanah official told a press conference during the launch that the project required Johor residents to be realistic and not to be narrow-minded in their future dealings with Singapore.

There is a worry that political sentiments in Johor may hurt the viability of the project. Nevertheless, given the project's economic heft, such feelings are likely to change.

On other fronts, despite the substantial investments planned by the federal government for Johor, differences remain. When the Johor Umno held its convention following the IDR's launch, Chief Minister Abdul Ghani proclaimed unexpectedly that Bangsa Malaysia was an unconstitutional concept.

A chorus of protests was heard instantly from various segments of society. The term 'Bangsa Malaysia', meaning 'Malaysian race' or 'Malaysian nation', has existed in the country's imagination at least since 1991, when Tun Dr Mahathir used it in a speech introducing his Vision 2020. Besides, many non-Malay political actors, including one of Umno's coalition partners, the Gerakan party, have since adopted the paradigm subsequently created around it.

As Premier Abdullah was out of the country when Datuk Abdul Ghani made his comment, Deputy Prime Minister Najib Razak had to jump in to present the federal viewpoint. He proclaimed that Bangsa Malaysia was a 'state of mind' and had nothing to do with the Constitution. He advised against further attempts to define it.

The reality of economic development has brought Kuala Lumpur closer to Johor Baru. The federal and state politicians involved will have to live with each other's style of politics. If done right, the economic dividend from the IDR should bring both sides closer together.

The writer is a fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. This is a personal comment.