

Haven for The Rich and Powerful

By Corwin Pek

Corruption is a major concern for my city. The prime minister, ministers, police officers, tax officials and judges will never be arrested and convicted for receiving bribes in return for favours and lucrative contracts. Corruption is also rampant on the streets with rogue police officers pressurising road users to pay bribes to avoid hefty fines. To make the situation worse, corruption also takes place in the prisons with prisoners being able to pay for luxurious rooms. Corruption has completely eroded my trust in the government, but we remain helpless in changing the status quo. The Prime Minister stays in power thanks to nepotism. He ensures that his family members controlled major businesses and appointed only favourites to key positions in the government.

I come home feeling grateful everyday as I walk through the doors of my public housing apartment after passing through the back streets and slums full of piles of rubbish, effluents mixed with the water we locals bathe in. As one would have guessed, the welfare of its citizens is not of paramount importance for the government. They did little or none to invest in public infrastructure to save cost for themselves.

Also, its public policy affected most people in the city, including my humble family, which promotes and ensures that success in life depends on wealth; and encourages the widening of the overall wealth gap between the haves and have-nots. The Government channels funds and focuses on the aristocrats, in exchange for remaining in power. This is a government by the rich; for the rich; and with the rich. I become hardened by the harsh reality of my city and disillusioned.

There is a lot of panache among the rich, flaunting their expensive cars and costly penthouses. New rich migrant businessmen take over private housing and behave arrogantly in public areas. Yet life is essentially lonely and empty for most city dwellers like me who return to cramped, over-priced apartments in noisy neighbourhoods and counting the exorbitantly high costs of daily life.

I dread going to school, following a major “reform” at the expense of students. Schools are now smaller – by half. It’s now “All work and no play” – the land where fields, basketball courts and other entertainment facilities used to sit on, has been cleared and sold off for further redevelopment of private properties for the rich. That leaves me with nowhere to play soccer with my friends anymore during recess and seriously hampers interaction among students. Furniture like fans, tables and chairs were also sold; utilities like water, electricity are limited to quotas – all done to fill up government coffers.

To further expand their coffers, the government turned to other avenues for taxes, through legalising the underground economy of gambling, prostitution and drug-trading, causing long-standing taboos to be broken. All these while ensuring that the economy stays afloat and the city (and government) unscathed. As a result, my family

worries sick for my sister every single day, haunted with fear that she may be pounced on by the prostitution industry, and it's my utmost responsibility to protect her. With all that's said, higher income tax also looms around my father, the sole breadwinner, adding to the already immense financial burden.

Just as ants are attracted by sugar, wealth and success attract crimes. At times, my family was hassled by cheats and corrupt government officials, ordered to pay hefty fines for crimes we never commit – ranging from alleged car speeding to evasion of taxes. Law enforcements, being civil servants and paid peanuts, often receive lucrative bribes to help cover up one's crime(s). The rich are essentially protected by law, turning the city into a sanctuary for facilitating money-laundering activities. The news is especially excruciating to watch. Undoubtedly, all media companies have been bribed to provide favourable coverage with the intent of glorifying government agencies on television while hiding what is happening behind the curtains really. They transmit the very message that the authorities want to relay to the public, brainwashing many in the process, but never me.

Do we panic? Must we change the way we live today? Taking action is expensive. Not taking action is more costly. It is an unrelenting struggle, but what remains is the determination of the people to defend our unity and take the necessary steps to return the power of the elite bureaucrats and politicians back to the people. The option of staging a revolt to depose the leaders is on the table. Marching the streets, breaking the laws, and anarchic behaviour, are the only ways to have our view heard by the authorities and by the media as we seek radical changes in policies. The challenge, however, is to get the cooperation of such a large population.

For now, it seems that the task remains an arduous one.

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