

## Privatizing the Rehabilitation of Idle Agriculture Land in Malaysia : Feedback from the Malay Folks

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### ABSTRAK

Kertas ini menampilkan dapatan kajian-kajian mengenai sikap orang Melayu di Semenanjung Malaysia terhadap pemuliharaan tanah pertanian terbiar mereka, khususnya tentang kemungkinan tanah terbiar ini dibangunkan semula oleh pemaju swasta. Hasil kajian menunjukkan kontradiksi dalam sikap mereka di mana pengakuan mereka tentang betapa perlunya masalah tanah terbiar ini diatasi tidak diiringi dengan kesediaan mereka untuk memberi laluan kepada pemaju swasta bukan Melayu untuk memulihkannya. Analisis hasil kajian selanjutnya menunjukkan bahawa di sebalik kontradiksi ini tersirat keinginan agar tanah terbiar mereka dibangunkan semula oleh anak Melayu sendiri demi menjamin ketuanan Melayu di negara ini.

### ABSTRACT

This paper presents the findings of studies regarding the attitude of rural Malays in Peninsular Malaysia pertaining to the development of their idle agricultural land, in particular, the prospects of the entry of private developers. The findings point to an inconsistency in their attitude, in that, while concurring to the need of resolving the idle land problem, the Malays were not prepared to have non-Malay private developers undertaking the task. Further probing highlights the fact that behind this refusal was a desire to relegate the task to the Malay younger generation as such bequeathing would ensure the continuity of the Malay dominance in this country.

### INTRODUCTION

Idle agricultural land was a Malaysian phenomenon in the 1980s. It still is. At the height of the official awareness of its prevalence in the late 1970s and early 1980s the Task Force for the Rehabilitation of Idle Land established by the Ministry of Agriculture in 1980 estimated that 880,000 hectares (2.2 million acres) of agricultural land in the country had been left idle or abandoned (see Sahak 1987; Chamhuri 1988). This represented some 20 per cent of all land allocated for agriculture in Peninsular Malaysia. Although by the middle of 1988, the Deputy Prime Minister was reported to have had put the latest figures on idle agricultural land at one half of those of 1981 (*Mingguan Malaysia* 25 September 1988) it needs little convincing that

one million acres, by any standard of resource utilization, were still a staggering amount of waste.

Revised government estimates reduced the national totals from 1.55 million hectares in 1980 to 725,000 hectares in 1986 (*National Agricultural Policy* 1986) to reflect successful subsequent attempts at rehabilitation. However, more radical figures - such as the 3 million hectares estimated in 1995 by the director-general of Forest Research Institute of Malaysia (*New Straits Times* 3 January 1995) - should not be regarded as unrealistic. For not only is this more in tune with the current pace of development and the rapidity of agricultural land conversion to other uses that it implies, but also with the fact that parcels of rehabilitated

idle land are prone to be abandoned time and again (Amriah *et al.* 1988-1990).

The most recent estimate of idle land in the country is the figure of 300,000 hectares stated by the current Minister of Agriculture in June 2000 (*Utusan Express* 26-06-2000). This is 25 per cent less than the 400,000 hectares declared by his Ministry in February 1999 (Third National Agricultural Policy (1998-2010) 1999, p.9). Such discrepancy, does not, however, necessarily mean that the country has been successful in reducing the extent of its idle agriculture land by rehabilitating it. For example, in Malacca alone, and as recent as October 1999, out of a total of 9,000 ha of padi land in the state, only 760 ha are still under cultivation while the rest of 8240 ha or 91.6 per cent of the total padi land still remain idle (*Utusan Express* 18-10-1999). Furthermore, as of January 2000, there is still some 1.5 million hectares of idle land in Sarawak, an area bigger than any state in the Peninsula (*Utusan Express* 11-1-2000). If this figure of 1.5 million ha for Sarawak is true, then the figure of 400,000 ha for the whole country published in the Third National Agricultural Policy (1998-2010) is false as is the figure of 300,000 ha for the whole nation quoted in June 2000 by the press above.

In other words, very little progress has been achieved in the way of rehabilitating idle agriculture land in Malaysia despite the bitter lesson learned of the importance of agriculture in general, and of food production in particular, since the regional economic crisis three years ago (1997).

Several factors have been identified as the causes of Malay idle agricultural land, namely: (1) unfavourable physical attributes including climate, topography, soil type, water supply and accessibility; (2) lack of technical know-how; (3) constraining economic and social conditions such as uneconomic size of holdings, severe shortage of manpower and machinery, costly inputs, uncertain market prospects and unequal competition from the non-agricultural and urban-based sectors; and (4) negative attitudes and behaviour on the part of the farming folks, such as distrusts, disputes and lack of cooperation among land owners (Amriah *et al.* 1988-1990).

The interplay of these factors are still evident since recent data clearly demonstrate that not only idle agriculture land still prevails in the midst of Malaysia's development but also that

it persists. Table 1 shows that government sponsored rehabilitation efforts hitherto only managed to reduce the extent of idle land in the Peninsula by 24.2 per cent in a span of 6 years (1980-1986). This is equivalent to an achievement rate of 4 per cent per year. More disappointing is the fact that the rejuvenation performance in a later year can be worse than a previous year. For example, the extent of the Peninsula's idle land in 1987 has increased by 15.4 per cent from that of 1986. This renders the rejuvenation achievement for the 1980-1987 period even smaller, namely, 10.3 per cent in 7 years or 1.5 per cent per year. Obviously, these are not achievement rates that the nation can be proud of, especially, considering the substantial resources – monetary and non-monetary – that have been invested in the rehabilitation efforts.

The meagerness of the rejuvenation achievement and the persistency of the phenomenon prompt us to ask again the very same question that has been asked all this while: Do Malays really condone the act of neglecting agriculture land that they possess?

Such questioning is pertinent since previous experiences did indicate that owning land was more important to the Malays than the viability of cultivating it. For instance, a Malay heir would still insist on inheriting a piece of land as minute as 0.28 sq. metres or 3 square feet (Malayan Land Administration Commission 1958; Wilson 1958; Census of Agriculture 1960; Maxwell 1884; Debs 1962; Ramachandran 1979; Carlson 1971, Shukor *et al.* 1984; Wan Hashim 1988; Sahak Mamat 1987; Amriah *et al.* 1988-91). Analysts attribute this insistence to non-productive motives such as social prestige (Wilson 1958; Syed Husin Ali 1975), loan collateral for consumption purposes, (Majlis 19 July 1934) and speculation (*Majalah Guru*, June 1929). Thus, because the real motive in owning land was not to cultivate it productively it should only come as a little surprise when, typically, the Malays' land were not tended properly (Ahmad Nazri 1985 for further evidence on such state of affair of the Malay agriculture land).

Situations have, of course, changed now. During the colonial days Malays must insist on owning land because, given the typical political-economic scenario which seldom favoured them then, that served as an only tangible source of benefit – economic and non-economic – for him and family. Now, in post-independence Malaysia,



TABLE 1  
Performance of rehabilitation efforts as reflected in the state of idle land hectarage in Malaysia for selected years

State	Area of arable land (Hectares)	Area of idle agriculture land (Hectares)							
		1980 <sup>1</sup>	1986 <sup>2</sup>	1986 change from 1980 (%)	1987 <sup>3</sup>	1987 change from 1986 (%)	1987 change from 1980 (%)	1995	1998 – 2000
Johor	50,600	47,100	20,646.5	-56.2	47,456.4	33.5	0.7	n.a	n.a
Kedah	205,500	140,100	132,355.6	-5.5	139,559.3	51.6	0.4	n.a	n.a
Kelantan	253,900	168,500	113,061.1	-21.8	99,927.0	-11.6	-40.7	n.a	n.a
Melaka	34,300	23,000	19,599.0	-14.8	20,398.0	4.1	-11.3	n.a	n.a
Ng. Sembilan	106,100	35,700	18,783.8	-47.4	31,662.7	68.5	-11.3	n.a	n.a
Pahang	1,155,500	59,800	41,101.3	-31.2	69,130.1	68.2	13.5	n.a	n.a
Perak	247,800	102,100	70,572.5	-30.9	98,254.6	39.2	3.7	n.a	n.a
Perlis	38,800	26,700	25,769.3	-3.5	24,860.0	-3.5	-6.9	n.a	n.a
P. Pinang	22,000	21,700	19,231.1	-11.3	16,515.3	-14.1	-23.9	n.a	n.a
Selangor	115,600	28,300	27,749.0	-1.9	27,824.6	0.3	-1.7	n.a	n.a
Terengganu	417,500	77,000	64,496.8	-16.2	78,822.8	-18.2	2.3	n.a	n.a
PENINSULA	3,107,500	730,000	553,372.9	-24.2	654,412.8	15.4	-10.3	2,177,700	n.a
SABAH	2,005,700	309,100	n.a	n.a	n.a	n.a	n.a	309,100	n.a
SARAWAK	837,000	513,200	n.a	n.a	n.a	n.a	n.a	573,200	n.a
MALAYSIA	5,950,200	1,552,200	n.a	n.a	n.a	n.a	n.a	3,000,000	n.a

## Notes:

1. According to the *Mid-Term Review of the Fourth Malaysia Plan, 1981-1985*.
2. Ministry of Agriculture 1987.
3. Lembaga Kemajuan Tanah dan Wilayah (*Berita Harian*, 13 Dis. 1989)
4. According to estimates of the Director General, FRIM (*New Straits Times*, 3 January 1995).
5. Assuming there was no change from 1980.

the Malays may avail themselves of more than one resource to make a better life for them and their families. For instance, as rural citizens they now are supposedly served by not less than twelve formal institutions which all carry the common mission of making them successful farmers. The question is why are their land still idle?

This paper aims at uncovering what lies behind the Malays' attitude of seemingly condoning the idling of their agriculture land even when privatization as a more realistic means of developing it may be resorted to.

### DATA AND METHODOLOGY

To achieve its purpose, this paper refers to the following sources of empirical data :

- (1) A study on the planning and implementation of idle land development programmes in Peninsular Malaysia, 1988-91. This research which was funded under the IRPA mechanism was conducted by the author and her colleagues Asmah Ahmad, Abd. Rahim Md. Nor dan Mohd. Fuad Mat Jali. At the end of its course, this study has involved a total of 9790 Malay farmers from all eleven states of the Peninsula as respondents. They were adults ranging from 40 to 65 years of age who functioned as heads of households.
- (2) A study on the perception of the Malay rural community of the privatization of idle land rejuvenation efforts, 1994. This study was conducted by the author with the assistance of honours year students doing her Agricultural Geography course. It was conducted on 22 villages in the states of Johor, Kedah, Kelantan, Negeri Sembilan, Perak, Perlis, Pulau Pinang and Selangor. A total of 800 respondents were interviewed. They comprised heads of households, ranging from 40 - 70 years of age .
- (3) An assessment of the current status of the idle land phenomenon in Malaysia based on secondary sources of information, 1998-2000.

### RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

#### *Contradictory Perceptions*

The studies reveal that no rural Malays were willing to advocate that their idle agriculture land be left idle. This is why when confronted

with the question as to whether they perceived idle agriculture land as a problem the majority of them answered in the affirmative. They gave the impression that idle agriculture land is a major problem (Table 2) that must be resolved (Table 3). In fact, even those who did not perceive it as a problem stressed that it must be cultivated.

This is rather different from Malays in the olden time who did not view negatively those parcels of land which, because they were uncultivated and abandoned, reverted to jungle. For instance, according to the Minangkabau Code (Maxwell 1884:172) it was customary, even religious, not to fret over idle land:

*... jika ladang tinggal didapati maka ditebas orang, ditebangnya kayu kayannya kemudian maka pulanglah kepada rimbanya sekali-kali jangan engkau perbantahkan oleh tuan-tuan sekalian kerana tanah pulanglah ke rimbanya, sekali-kali jangan engkau perbantahkan oleh tuan-tuan padang itu pulanglah kepada Allah dan janganlah diperbantahkan yang demikian itulah kata adat.*

*[... if the produce of the land you abandoned is taken away, then reverted to jungle, do not dispute the matter for it is the nature of land to revert to woods; don't ever dispute it, for with God it rests; such is the custom].*

Thus, based on the above, it is quite clear that today's Malays have a more positive attitude towards land utilization. This positiveness, however, does not necessarily mean that Malays are willing to surrender their idle land which they are unable to rehabilitate back to the government. Even though the majority of them were aware of the fact that the Islamic teaching is opposed to the condoning of idle land (the Quran: 6:99), many of them objected to

TABLE 2  
The Malays's perception of idle agriculture land

Question	Is it true that idle agriculture land is not a problem?	
	Number	%
True	128	16.0
Not true	643	80.4
Unsure	39	3.6
Total	800	100.0

Source: *Fieldwork*, 1994



TABLE 3

The Malays' perception of the desirability of resolving the problem of idle agriculture land

Question	Is it necessary to solve the idle agriculture land problem?	
	Number	%
Necessary	734	91.7
Not necessary	34	4.3
Unsure	32	4.0
Total	800	100.0

Source: *Fieldwork*, 1994

returning their idle land to the legitimate authorities in order to avoid wasting the valuable land resource, although such move is more in line with the spirit of the Islamic teaching. This can be seen from the comparison of Table 4 with Table 5. In Table 4, the number of respondents who were aware of the Islamic prohibition against wasting land totals up to 92 per cent, but this percentage goes down drastically to 55 per cent in Table 5 to denote those who agreed to the giving up of such idle land so that they can be rehabilitated by the authorities or other relevant parties.

Now this seems like a contradiction in the attitude of the Malays towards land. They said that land should not be left idle but they were reluctant to pave the way for idle land to be rehabilitable.

### *The Preferred Rescuers*

Most of the Malay farmers interviewed were of the opinion that they should no longer be expected to rejuvenate idle agriculture land in their localities. This is because they lacked both the physical strength to carry out the arduous job themselves and the capital either to hire labour or to pay for farm mechanization instead. Labour shortage has been a nagging problem in Malaysia's countryside for decades now. It was one vital reason hindering Malay farmers and landowners from rejuvenating their idle land and when they, too, could not afford to pay for farm machines and other inputs that rejuvenation entails, rehabilitating their idle land was simply out of question.

Quite often past encounters with failure prevented them subsequently from trying again. Studies show that parcels of idle padi land which were successfully rejuvenated the first time tended to become idle again for a variety of reasons. One was the absence of subsidies for subsequent rejuvenation efforts. The other was the incurrance of losses due to poor pest management. Alternatively, in the case of rejuvenation projects which involved cash crops, the first success was almost always hard to repeat either because government assistance in marketing the produce was withdrawn or that coordination was so hopeless that incomes from subsequent rejuvenation projects were much reduced (Amriah *et al.* 1988-91). Bitter

TABLE 5

The Malays' perception of the implementation of the Islamic view on idling agriculture land

Question:	Do you agree that in line with the Islamic prohibition of idle land the government should repossess the Malay's idle agriculture land?							
	Agree		Disagree		Unsure		Total	
Answers:	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
States								
Johor	372	54.1	314	45.7	1	0.2	687	100.0
Kedah	676	62.0	383	35.1	31	2.9	1090	100.0
Kelantan	425	36.2	732	62.5	15	1.3	1172	100.00
Melaka	478	56.2	358	42.1	15	1.7	851	100.00
Negeri Sembilan	370	43.8	458	54.3	16	1.9	844	100.00
Pahang	423	44.4	529	55.6	0	0.0	952	100.00
Perak	506	50.6	482	48.2	12	1.2	1000	100.00
Perlis	168	57.5	104	35.6	20	6.9	292	100.00
Pulau Pinang	248	57.3	234	48.4	1	0.3	483	100.00
Selangor	825	67.4	380	31.1	18	1.5	1223	100.00
Terengganu	879	73.5	283	23.7	34	2.8	1196	100.00
Total	5370	54.8	4255	43.5	163	1.7	9790	100.00

experiences and painful memories like these underline the Malay farmers' reluctance to ever again take risks with new rejuvenation projects.

As such, they expect the government to lead back subsequent rejuvenation projects. To start the rejuvenation ball rolling the government is expected to extend fund and subsidise inputs. Ideally, the government should supervise and coordinate all group rejuvenation projects. As usual, the government must also provide extension services, infrastructural facilities such as irrigation, farm machineries, technical know-how in production, processing and marketing intelligence. The government should also start doing something dramatic to motivate local youths to join the rejuvenation projects (Table 6).

The question is would the government be willing to shoulder back the burden of leading idle land rejuvenation? Is this re-engagement justifiable?

Previously, the government had initiated rejuvenation efforts through its three main agencies: the Ministry of Agriculture, the Federal

Land Consolidation and Rehabilitation Authority (FELCRA) and the Rubber Industry Smallholder Development Authority (RISDA). Under the purview of the Agriculture Ministry, agencies which were directly involved with rejuvenation of idle padi land were the Department of Agriculture, the Integrated Agricultural Development Programme (IADP), the Farmers Organization Authority (FOA) and the Area Farmers Organization (AFO). All of these agencies were responsible for initiating rejuvenation projects, extending credits and subsidies, enhancing infrastructural facilities, disseminate marketing information and rationalise alternative production strategies ranging from individual to group farming, mini-estate and corporatisation.

FELCRA rehabilitated idle land through a two-pronged approach of consolidation and direct rehabilitation. Under the consolidation approach fragmented parcels of land were consolidated so that their sizes become economic to be jointly rejuvenated. In this strategy share schemes and taking over abandoned agriculture

TABLE 6  
The Malays' perception of the government role in the development of idle agriculture land

Question	What do you think that the government should do with the Malays' land which are lying idle now?	No.	%
Answers			
1	Give capital subsidies so that owners can rejuvenate their idle agriculture land	221	27.6
2	Assist with technical know-how so that owners can rejuvenate their idle agriculture land	71	8.9
3	Bring in entrepreneurs who can rejuvenate the idling land	13	1.6
4	Launch campaigns to induce local youths to rejuvenate the idling land with government aids	107	13.4
5	Repossess the idling land and give it to those who want to cultivate it	25	3.1
6	Issue land titles to those who had previously tended the idling land	4	0.5
7	Improve existing irrigation and other infrastructural facilities so that idling land can be rehabilitated	73	9.1
8	Lease out locals' idling land and rejuvenate it	8	1.0
9	Give extension services to local owners of idle land so that they can rejuvenate it	92	11.5
10	Government rejuvenates idling land (e.g. by initiating group rejuvenation projects)	109	13.6
11	Change the land titles	6	0.8
12	Force land owners to rejuvenate their idling land but give them aids to do so	19	2.4
13	Force land owners to rejuvenate their idling land and penalise those who defy	2	0.2
14	Change the land title conditions so that different crops can be grown	11	1.4
15	Develop idle land as FELCRA had done	15	1.9
16	Guarantee market for farm produce	2	0.2
17	Form idle land rejuvenation co-operatives	7	0.9
18	Don't know / uncertain	15	1.9
Total		800	100.0

Source: Fieldwork, 1994



land were the chief instruments of implementation. Under the rejuvenation approach co-operative or group farming were the chief modes of rejuvenation although individual farmers could still opt to embark on rejuvenation personally but with FELCRA's managerial assistance.

RISDA also adopted a two-pronged strategy to rehabilitate smallholders' idle rubber holdings. The first was in-situ group development whereby idle rubber holdings were rehabilitated collectively. The second was the mini-estate mode whereby old rubber holdings were consolidated, replanted and collectively managed after the plantation fashion.

The performance of all these rejuvenation strategies has been far from satisfactory if the rehabilitation rate of 1.5 per cent per year as reflected in Table 1 above is the yardstick. Several inter-twining factors conspired to hamper a better performance of the rejuvenation programmes including, of course, unhelpful attitudes on the part of the Malay folks themselves. The latter, however, were not the real reason why the government decided to pull out from leading idle land rehabilitation. The real reason had a lot to do with economic and business calculations which were quite far removed from the consciousness and comprehension of the Malay folks themselves.

For instance, with respect to the rejuvenation of idle padi land, the government decided to limit assistance to the rice bowl areas. This was in line with the government policy of limiting domestic rice production to only 65 per cent of the national self sufficiency level, a decision that the government made based on the shrewd economic rationale that Malaysia was a high cost rice producer (*Business Times* 2 February, 1993). This was the government way of reducing the burden of input and price subsidies of domestic padi production which have, it was thought, reached rediculus levels. Fertiliser subsidies had increased from 10 per cent in 1965 to 100 per cent in 1990 and price subsidies had jumped from RM16.50 per 100 kg in 1984 to RM27.50 per 100 kg in 1990 (Sivalingam 1993).

Furthermore, the government had not been very happy with the costs of the FELCRA's rejuvenation projects. For instance, out of the total of RM136 million spent by the agency to

develop land in 1985, only 48 per cent really went into helping participant farmers; the remainder was spent on infrastructural development, management apparatus and staff emoluments (this latter item alone formed 24 per cent of the total expenditure). This means that for every ringgit spent on a land rehabilitation programme a participant farmer had only to repay 48 sens (Sivalingam 1993). In other words, to extend a loan of RM1 to help rejuvenating idle farm land, the government had to spent an additional amount of 52 sens. Viewed this way, the FELCRA mode of rehabilitation was very costly indeed.

As to the RISDA's, the government was rethinking the justification for the various subsidies that the agency extended under its mini-estatisation programmes. Among the subsidies reviewed were replanting and subsistence loans extended to participating smallholders while waiting for the trees to mature. All of these loans incurred extremely low interest rates. Meanwhile all operational costs were borne by the government, including staff emoluments and charges for extension services, technical advice and the like (Hori 1991). What was even more apprehensive about the RISDA method was that after incurring such a vast expenditure for replanting rubber holdings, the participating smallholders' role was little more than that of menial labourers while the management still recruited more managerial and supervisory personnel (*Mid-Term Review of the Fifth Malaysia Plan*).

That the government was very serious about disengaging itself from leading the development of Malaysia's agricultural sector may be gauged from the 1992 National Agricultural Policy. According to this NAP, a truly sustainable agriculture would not develop in Malaysia if the government continues to prop the sector with all sort of subsidies and services. Instead the government must give way to the private sector and allow market forces to operate fully. The private sector and market forces will not only see to the natural running of the cultivation, processing and marketing affairs of the agricultural produce, but also to the amalgamation and consolidation of fragmented and small farms. Only in this way will the Malaysian agricultural sector be truly efficient, sustainable and progressive.

*The Unwelcome Players*

The policy shift from being led by the public (government) sector to being driven by the private sector definitely requires some radical adjustment in terms of land acquisition, ownership and tenure. The ownership status of the land to be developed or rejuvenated must be legally clear in a market driven agricultural development. This may not be an imperative when development and rejuvenation is led by the government. As such, the first step would be to build an institutional capacity to define, allocate and legally protect the rights of the private entrepreneurs. Secondly, undistorted market must be established for land to be properly transacted. All this is to ensure that productive factors such as land flow only to buyers who offered the highest value for their utilization (Sivalingam 1993).

In any case, the Malays' perception of the privatization of idle land rehabilitation poses certain problems. Research findings indicate that the Malay folks were rather divided about the desirability of letting private entrepreneurs to rehabilitate their idle land (Table 7). They became even more uncomfortable if the potential private developers were not of Malay origin (Table 8).

The situation was rather different if privatization only meant the leasing out, and not outright sale, of the Malays' land. More respondents expressed consent to this version of privatization. Nevertheless, the number of those opposed to the idea superceded that of those who consented to it (Table 9).

The question posed in Table 9 was designed to probe into the Malay folks' sensitivity when tempted with supposedly generous price offers from potential non-Malay private developers. The answers show that the majority of them (85.2 per cent) were reluctant to make way for the potential non-Malay developers even if they were offered very good prices for their idle agriculture land.

*Opportunities in Problems*

The doubts cast by the rural Malay folks over the privatization of their idle land and their reluctance to lease it out to private developers reflected their worry about, and concern with, the implications of losing possession and control of land as a most valued tangible repository of their worth. They wondered if privatization would

TABLE 7  
Perception of the Malay folks of the privatization of idle land rejuvenation

Question:	Is it good that private developers rehabilitate Malays' idle land?	
Answers:	Number	%
Good	430	53.8
Not good	350	43.8
Uncertain	13	1.6
Wait and see	7	0.8
Total	800	100.0

Source : Fieldwork 1994

TABLE 8  
Perception of the Malay folks regarding the involvement of non-Malay developers in the rejuvenation of their idle agriculture land

Question:	What do you think of non-Malay entrepreneurs developing Malays' idle agriculture land?	
Answers:	Number	%
Should be allowed	274	34.2
Should never be allowed	515	64.4
Unsure	11	1.4
Total	800	100.0

Source : Fieldwork 1994

TABLE 9  
Perception of the Malay folks regarding the leasing out of their idle land to non-Malay developers

Question:	What do you think of Malays leasing out their idle land to non-Malay developers?	
Answers:	Number	%
Should be allowed	339	42.4
Should be allowed with certain conditions	12	1.5
Should never be allowed	445	55.6
Unsure	4	0.5
Total	800	100.0

Source : Fieldwork 1994

really benefit them and not another instrument for savvy businessmen to rake in substantial returns while distributing only crumbs to them. This could not be a fair situation since they were the very owners of the resource. They wondered



if this was not going to be another phase and another form of their disempowerment. They reasoned if private rehabilitation could really bring in worthwhile profits, why should not they rejuvenate the land themselves. Indeed they were of the opinion that being the owners themselves, and instead of being disenfranchised, a way must be found so that they could be empowered to undertake the task of rehabilitating their own idle land.

And finding that way brought them back to the government re-engagement. According to them the government has a valid moral responsibility to help them gain this empowerment, this obligation to make successful farm entrepreneurs out of them – and especially when it means preventing Malay land from falling into non-Malay hands.

From the government perspective – and this is amplified again in the latest Third National Agriculture Plan – such perception by the Malay folks only shows how ignorant the typical rural Malay folks are with regard to the dynamics of sustainable and viable agricultural development. The way the government sees it, all government-sponsored assistance that should go into the empowerment of Malay farmers has already been extended, yet the results have not been satisfactory. The noble mission of creating a progressive and competitive Malay farming community has proven to be beyond accomplishment. After three or four long decades of implementing benevolent national policies Malay farmers have turned out to be as weak and dependent as ever.

How and where have things gone wrong can be a subject of unending polemics? The very question that is in need of an urgent answer now, however, is who should be entrusted with the task of rehabilitating the Malays' idle agriculture land given (1) the current government's hands-off policy, while (2) the Malay folks are not ready to welcome the entry of non-Malay private developers. The rural Malay folks had expressed their wish that their idle land be rehabilitated by their own people. Elsewhere, it was found that there was a marked shift in the occupational preference of rural Malay youth (Amriah 1997). The latter demonstrates that rural Malay youths of the nineties no longer prefer to work as government employees or school teachers as did their predecessors decades ago; instead they have come

to prefer working as businessmen, entrepreneurs and professionals. Perhaps, building on this fact Malaysia may do better nurturing the growth of young Malay agricultural entrepreneurs than imposing on the Malay farming community agricultural development projects which are conceived by, or in conjunction with, non-Malay and other foreign developers.

For, behind the seemingly oblivious attitude of the rural Malay folks towards their idle land, there is the ardent wish to entrust the task of rejuvenating their idle land to their own people. They believe such a stance is imperative if they were to perpetuate the dominance of the Malays in Malaysia.

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