

## COMMENT

# Rise of the Malaysian middle class

**DYNAMIC FORCE:** This emerging new group is more than just an economic entity

**H**ISTORIANS and sociologists are fascinated by the notion of the middle class. Change masters strive to create the middle class. Individuals and families aspire to get out of the socio-economic trap of being in the lower rungs of existence and move into the middle class.

The middle class raises aspirations and expectations, captures the imagination and is at once liberating and entrapping.

Within the middle class are the nouveau-riche, the new rich and the parvenu, the uprooted. The new rich may have sudden wealth or hard-earned wealth and not know how to relish the privileges, luxuries and opportunities the middle class creates.

Those uprooted from the village and rural areas, from the slums of the cities, have to create new roots,

new settlements and new mindsets of existence.

The middle class created revolutions, been swept by revolutions, sustained revolutions and benefited from revolutions — whether political, scientific or technological — or mental revolutions.

The members of the middle class are the dynamic force of change and the conservation forces resisting change, holding on to their zones of comfort.

The easiest definition of the middle class is the economic definition, but the middle class is more, beyond the economic, at once simultaneously legal, educational, socio-cultural and psychological; they are left, right, centre, all.

In contemporary society, much has been written and researched about the middle class, mainly by middle-class scholars. Among the early studies were those by Nordin Selat on *The Malay Administrative Middle Class* (1975) and Khasnor Johan on *The Emergence of the Modern Malay Administrative Elite* (1984).

The newly emerging middle class may be different from the middle class in history. The digital society of European middle class of today is different from the middle class in



Bringing boxes and suitcases to the Big Bad Wolf sale is just one of many pastime for the middle-class Malaysian.

European history.

The humongous forces of change and social media, of clouds and crowdsourcing, of citizen-driven new knowledge and aspirations, and the evolving realities of the nexus of forces continue to challenge contemporary definitions and understanding of the new middle class.

The traditional middle class partakes of private middle-class homes

in cities and rural areas, private bathrooms, basic literacy, mastery of skills and professions, savings and extra wealth to luxuriate in candies and condoms for control of numbers of children, better health, bigger and different dreams, and new, novel and ever changing almost hedonistic lifestyles.

Yet, there are those members of the middle class, liberated from serfdom and slavehood, who see the injustices of social structure and unsustainable and meaningless self-gratification. These small members of the middle class are pioneers, innovators, entrepreneurs, imagination engineers of the new society and the new world.

The middle class is not homogeneous but are heterogeneous. The middle class is also a state of minds. Those who were abroad were those who were exposed to the bold, rich, powerful and famous in Western culture and Middle Eastern cultures, picked up history from ancient ruins and contemporary engineering marvels and understand what Malaysia can be.

They enjoyed literature, theatre, music, the arts and the glories and vagaries of past civilisations and experienced realities beyond their ethnic confines, balancing memories of their cultural organisations and heritages from past human civilisations.

Today, the Malaysian middle class queues for the Matta Fair, brings boxes and suitcases to buy books at the Big Bad Wolf Book sales, watches the Oscars and football, and follows political events everywhere. They create their own blogs and engage in social media. They become the culprits of rumour mongering and creators of conspiracy theories about everything, everywhere.

They are the bureaucrats, technocrats, politicians, teachers, businessmen. They are not the youths but are the parents of the youths. The middle class comprises members of the knowledge economic, the drivers of the innovation economy.

Whatever has been attained can regress. Inflation and political turmoil can send the middle class, the nouveau riche, back to abject poverty of wealth, mind, soul and become unambitious, uninspiring masses. It is the middle class which will have the leadership and human rights watch and who will make connections with the outside world to ensure that new tomorrows are always there for the betterment of their societies and mankind.

In democratic processes, the coming of age of the middle class means they do not vote for a party but for what parties stand for, for role models, for issue of importance and for principles they believe in and not for personalities.

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