

## PRISON REFORM

# MODERNISING PRISON MANAGEMENT

**I**T is most encouraging to hear from Dewan Negara president Tan Sri Dr Rais Yatim that a group of senators and members of parliament across party lines have decided to get together to establish a caucus of parliamentarians to study the problem of congestion and overcrowding in prisons and detention centres.

They are concerned that the prisons and detention centres are overcrowded, making them breeding grounds for Covid-19 infections.

The formation of this group marks the beginning of a bipartisan collaboration between senators and MPs, in partnership with academia and civil society groups, to deliberate on an urgent matter affecting the people's lives.

Let's hope this group will soon be formally recognised as a select parliamentary committee. It will give it a higher status to make

recommendations to investigate matters of wide public interest and ensure transparency, accountability and integrity in government policies and how they are being implemented.

An example for urgent parliamentary investigation is the issue raised recently by Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah about the rush to purchase vaccines.

At the hearing, our scientists and medical experts as well as civil society groups can testify whether the government is justified in its decision, while ministers and officials will have the opportunity to present facts and figures to support their case.

Such openness will provide the public with confidence in government policy decisions and ensure their buy-in. The concern about overcrowded prisons is real because about 10 per cent of inmates are reported to have been infected.

At least seven deaths and more than 560 positive cases have been reported among prison staff and officers.

These staff will bring the virus home to their families, friends and relatives, infecting the whole community. In no time, villages and towns will turn into red zones, forcing the government to impose lockdowns, resulting in an economic downturn.

Many prisoners have also been infected with tuberculosis, HIV and other viral diseases. With 121 to 200 per cent overcapacity, prisoners are not getting the necessary medical attention, jeopardising their lives and also the health of workers, staff and the community at large.

Up to June, more than 54 countries have adopted early release of prisoners and more than 34 countries have implemented early pardons to reduce the prison popu-

lation because medical facilities in prisons were overwhelmed by the rising number of infected prisoners.

In Malaysia, this overcrowding is made worse by the large number of migrant workers among the detainees. As a result, they do not get proper medical attention.

About 69 per cent of the prisoners are those charged with minor drug offences, a higher number than in other countries.

Criminalisation and imprisonment for minor drug offences are often counterproductive in rehabilitating young drug users.

It's better to use the curative approach that will give them access to medical treatment, counselling and job guidance to make them realise their mistakes and return them to a productive life.

In advanced countries, there are correctional centres working with non-governmental organisa-

tions and supported by the government as well as private charities to provide shelter to minor drug offenders and runaway teens and help them avoid doing more harm to themselves and their families.

Other countries have carried out reforms to modernise their prison management and penal systems to overcome the problem of overcrowded prisons and detention centres and prevent them from becoming hotspots for infectious diseases.

The all-party caucus in our Parliament should look into similar reforms for Malaysia as part of our ambition towards becoming a caring society under the government's Shared Prosperity Vision.

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