RARE EARTH PROCESSING

LESSONS FROM THE LYNAS EPISODE

MANY may remember the Lynas issue and its rare earth business that was raised at the last general election.

The issue of Lynas almost took centre stage then.

The opposition made all kinds of claims on rare earth, all in the interest of securing votes.

One claim was that the processing of rare earth would be disastrous for the public, especially those living near the Lynas plant.

They produced fake evidence linking rare earth to cancer and other side effects. Their exaggerated claims somehow caused some unease among the people there.

The public took the opposition's bait mainly because they were ignorant.

Rare earth processing is a new business in the country, although rare earth itself is not entirely new. During the era of tin mining, waste from tin processing comprised rare earth.

And, children, including some among the vocal critics of Lynas, used to run around such tin mining waste, including a few of our colleagues at the Academy of Sciences. They are all fine despite the exposure.

The Lynas rare earth processing plant in Gebeng, Kuantan. Rare earth processing is a new business in Malaysia. FILE PIC

It was a pity such an issue was exploited at great cost. It was, to some extent, a waste of public money. At the academy, we spent time and money building factual information on rare earth.

I was sent to visit a thriving rare earth facility in La Rochelle, France. The aim was to gather evidence on the safety aspects of rare earth processing. To my surprise, the facility has been operating for decades with no harm inflicted on the environment.

In fact, La Rochelle itself was, and still is, a thriving tourist destination, attracting visitors from the European Union and the world.

Fellows of the academy appeared on television and radio to explain to the public that rare earth waste was not like nuclear waste. The radioactive level was extremely low, oftentimes lower than the natural background levels around Kuantan.

There are lessons that we can learn from the Lynas incident. We should never take things for granted when it comes to bringing in investment to the country.

Rare earth processing is a good example where those opposed to the government's well-meaning intention to bring in foreign direct investments and jobs twisted facts to confuse the public.

They hoped to derail the project. That would have been unfortunate because the demand for rare earth in the new digital economy is expected to continue rising.

At the academy, we have even produced a report urging the government to initiate our own rare earth industry.

Our studies have shown that we do have healthy deposits of the more expensive heavy rare earth that is ready to be mined.

We have even drawn up a plan on how to move that industry as another source of revenue for the country.

Admittedly, the nation needs to diversify its revenue streams. Though the government has, over the years, done much to diversify the economy, moving away from total reliance on oil, we need to be on the constant lookout for emerging opportunities.

With the advent of the new global economic order revolving around Industry 4.0, the rare earth business will, undoubtedly, be prominent in the coming years.

The other lesson from the Lynas incident is that we need to monitor scientific claims in the media. Many errant parties are spreading fake scientific information to dupe the public to buy their products.

The palm oil industry is aware of such tactics. There are also those peddling all kinds of medicines, spreading false science. We need to have a group of scientists working closely with the media to monitor such fake information.

The academy can host this group. With the 14th General Election looming, the government should monitor the emergence of fake claims, as was the case with Lynas.

For matters related to science, the academy has the expertise to do so.

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