

## Maintenance culture lacking in Sabah

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By: David Thien

Kota Kinabalu: Sabah's only remaining pre-war structures, namely the Tourism Sabah Office and Atkinson Clock Tower bear evidence to the importance of meritocracy and maintenance culture.

Nowadays, it is considered good if a modern concrete building can last 50 years.

Architect Rizal Ahmad Banjar shared this opinion at a recent NGO Sabar – Kopitiam Council "Sabah Voices to Action" Episode 6 podcast hosted by talk show stars Adi and Haffisz on "Infrastructure & Housing: From the Eyes of the Professionals.

Rizal said as a professional, this has concerned him very much. Other than adhering to good building standards, a good culture of maintenance is vital for Sabah to ensure that the lifespan of a building can last long.

He cited the many great cathedrals of Europe that have lasted for a few centuries as what good and proper maintenance could ensure.

"That's the irony of constructing a building. In Europe, there are cathedrals that can last hundreds of years. Now with all our technology, with all our skills, with all our knowhow, if the building can last for 50 years, it can be considered good.

"Planning must involve long-term implementation up to 100 years if possible, to last up to our grandchildren's generation with good and proper maintenance. So that they, our future generations, don't have to spend millions for repairs.

"We should not waste or take up the future of our next generations," Ar Rizal said.

Water industry expert Datuk Ir Ts Dr Amarjit Singh cited the Taj Mahal that lasted hundreds of years in India.

He attributed it to master craftsmen who were specialists in their fields of building expertise compared to the situation now that any privileged person who can be a jack of all trades can also pass off as a building contractor, with no qualms to cut corners.

Podcast host Haffisz brought up the issue of the "Alibaba" system with the main contractor getting the bulk of the contract sum, while appointing subcontractors to do the actual work getting the least payment and how to end such dishonest practices.

Ar Rizal and Dr Amarjit said it is vital to practise meritocracy in getting the right people in a merit-approach system to do the works responsibly.

"I am a Bumiputra myself. This policy has been manipulated and abused to the extent it has become a commission thing."

"From my experience we know who is doing the work. They are the last ones to get the money. They receive the least money. Sometimes they don't receive at all. That's the worst."

Datuk Ir Ts Dr Amarjit Singh: "The big companies get the jobs, and still they will get subcontractors to do the work. Why don't the Government instead give it directly to the subcontractor level."

"When the Bumiputra ideology came it slowly diminished the opportunities for others, non-Bumiputras. We call ourselves Malaysians, but are we actually equally treated? That's another question."

Dr Amarjit said the contractors doing water treatment plants and other projects were largely the non-Bumiputras and some Westerners.

Ar Rizal said most main contractors have not been helpful in preventing delays and the need for extension of time after marking up the subcontractors' contract sum, sometimes by 30 per cent. The subcontractors don't mark up their prices if awarded directly.

He said if the system is reversed, "You are in a win-win situation, you get good works and completion in time."

"What the subcontractors don't have is the so called Bumiputra status, the so-called connections and so-called licensing."

"What we want is their specialist skills with a priority to complete the project."

Ar Rizal said having supervised thousands of big and small projects, all faced delays. He is a local Bumiputra and believes Bumiputras should be helped.

However, there should be merit in ensuring that the right and qualified people get to do the work.

Ar Rizal suggested that project works be awarded to the people who actually do the job whereby the subcontractors be given the job with the appropriate contract sum.

"I am sure you have noticed that students after they have finished SPM or STPM. The Nons don't have many opportunities to get either scholarship or go for matriculations to further their studies."

He hoped that in Malaysia, things are changing for the better with the younger generations.

“Infrastructure development involves maintenance. You can build the best infrastructure, but if you do not maintain it, the infrastructure will deteriorate over time.” Sabah has to produce more professionals in the fields that the State plans to excel in, Dr Amarjit said. Planning is one matter and implementation is another vital factor.

“We need to have the right people doing the right things as in meritocracy,” he said.

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**"Sabah Voices to Action - Shaping Sabah's Future Together"** is a citizen-driven, non-partisan initiative running from March to June 2025, dedicated to amplifying Sabahans' voices, fostering meaningful discussions, and shaping policies on education, healthcare, public infrastructure, and good governance.

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**Together, we can build a stronger, more inclusive Sabah!**

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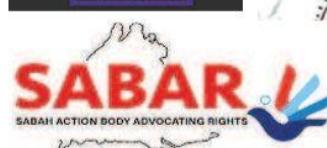
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At the podcast session: (From left) Adi, Rizal, Amarjit and Haffisz.

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