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The sudden upsurge of interest in consumerism coming from various sectors in the country is a dominant trend of the late 70s. This trend is predicted to be even stronger in the 80s. This new wave of both interest and consciousness in consumerism can best be explained in the light of socio-economic context.

The 70s, being the second decade of development is marked by new thinking and reevaluation of achievements and disasters of the earlier decade of development. Thus when the Consumer Association of Penang (CAP) was born in Nov. 1969, the timing was perfect vis-a-vis the socio-economic atmosphere prevalent in the country then. When mid 70s followed with much worry and anxieties due to the serious state of inflation, especially '74 and '75 CAP has by then gained enough strength to come out as the consumers saviour. However the pre-matured birth of Selangor Consumer Association (SCA) in 1965 saw only a few years of activities. Furthermore SCA then seems to concentrate in major towns among the educated urbanites of K.L. and P.J. Being a middle class phenomenon it did not reach out to the masses. This was perhaps one major reason for the decline of early SCA, since it did not conform to the new thinking of 70s whereby development in whatever form must be for the masses. The excellent leadership of CAP combined with its full time trained staff also accounted for its tremendous success. Whereas the voluntary nature of other state consumer bodies are usually faced with various problems. The volunteers in the various state consumer bodies are usually faced with various problems. The volunteers in the various state consumer bodies normally perform intricate balancing acts between their own careers, family responsibilities and social commitments besides their voluntary duties. Thus one cannot expect miracles out of these voluntary leaders. Furthermore as producers of services in their various capacities, they cannot neglect their duties, otherwise they would have to face the consequences of their neglect. These reasons also partly explain the less active state consumer bodies.

However all this seems to take a new turn in late 70s, after the inflation. General public seems to be much more critical of government's ineffective measures to curb the inflation and the serious effects were much felt both by the lower and middle income brackets. The 70s too is marked by the so-called revolution of rising expectation from the masses. They have given the mandate to the government to solve the problems and if they feel the government machineries cannot do that as effectively as they would like too, then they have to look for other venues or alternatives. Being human they then look for a possible solution to their problems. It was then that consumerism seems to be most noted as a problem shooter, especially with the good work of CAP and its very popular newsletter Utusan Konsumer. The public realised that this could be the answer to their problems. On their own they could not handle their woes and complaints, even government machineries seem ineffective at times. But CAP can solve some if not all of their problems as seen by cases reported. A drowning man clutches at the flimsiest of straw, and definitely CAP appears to be a strong floating board.

The fact that CAP made a lot of noise and gained such high reputation as the champion of consumers seems very impressive and provoked other state consumer bodies which have been dormant for years to inject new life and start moving. Thus we see the revival of SCA, and emergence of others like CANS (Negri Sembilan), PAC (pahang) and PCA (Perak). Even the national body FOMCA born in 1973 is being reactivated.

One of the most interesting consequence of all these developments are the interest shown by the government and government bodies. We must give credit to the government for being rather responsive to this new phenomenon. Certain ministries have even set up consumer related divisions within their folds. The Ministry of Trade and Industry set up the Consumer Affairs division and Enforcement division with very dynamic leaderships. Lately the Minister of Waterworks and Public Utilities is considering setting up their own complaints division. These are some of the good signs that consumer association demands thus far have not fallen totally on deaf ears. However one must admit that a lot more has to be done and more consumer conscious public servants are required to disseminate the idea and to serve daily needs of the public.

If consumer movement have been associated with middle-class, urban-centred groups in the past, in Malaysia today the focus is being reversed. Much attention is being focussed towards the lower income groups, the villagers, urban slums and estates. The school children especially in secondary schools, are not spared either. Penang, with CAP, sees a very active participation by school children organizing exhibitions, poster competitions and the like through their school's consumer clubs. Other state consumer bodies are also in the wake of motivating school children to be consumer-oriented in their tender years.

The mass media too is picking up the cue pretty fast. In the past, normally, only The Star and Malay Mail supported consumer issues and reports generously on such matters. Now, others including the most conservative New Straits Times too, is convinced that there is news in consumer issues. TV too is giving the general public, irregular doses on the matter as seen from KESUMA, SCOPE and FOKUS. Radio Malaysia plays its own role by giving several tips on simple advice regarding consumerism to listeners in their various programmes. This range from chit-chats to proper 15 minutes programmes of "Consumer World" on their network. In short consumerism is the 'in' thing. The spectrum of interested groups range from students, housewives, professionals, academics and ministers. Some Universities especially University of Malaya and the National University are even conducting courses in consumer related issues, like consumer education and consumer psychology. Thus consumerism seems to be closing upon us from various sides and by various media.

This trend is expected to gain both tempo and speed in the 80s, and will be a very strong influence in the near future. As a movement fighting for the plight of the general masses, the uneducated and the poor,

it can thus become a very popular cause for those who care. Another reason for its popularity is the neutrality of its colour. Most Consumer associations are open to everybody, irrespective of age, sex, race, religion or education. In a world today complicated by various forms of discriminations and quotas, this is perhaps the only association and movement that fights for you as a human being created by the Almighty. The human race is in a state of anxiety if not panic, as he or she is evaluated differently based on certain man-made criteria. Consumer movement is the only group which is devoid of all those conditions. If you are a human being and you have a genuine consumer problem, come to a consumer association, you are most welcomed, to help us to help you. Thus explains the new popularity of consumer movement today and tomorrow.

It provides the shelter that man cannot find elsewhere, in a world which passes judgement on you for being different in your economic status, social, racial or religion.

The popularity of such a movement will naturally attract other interested individuals or groups, either to share the popularity, to be with the 'in' thing or having their own interests to promote. Consumer bodies should be aware of such individuals or groups. The continued success of consumer movement depends on its neutrality. Should anybody wishes to use consumerism as a platform especially in the case of politicians, consumerism may well be a dead cause. We refute not the sincerity of the politician in promoting the good of the masses, but between consumerism and politics can never be a marriage. Neither do we want to see an illicit affair between the two. On this final note of caution we can look forward to the involvement or being involved in consumerism in our daily life when consumerism becomes a household word and practice, for young and old alike, for you and I, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you.
