

Palm Oil: Machiavellian Undertones?

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Niccolo Machiavelli was born on May 3, 1469, in Florence, Italy. Machiavelli's life was very interesting. He lived a nondescript childhood in Florence, and his main political experience in his youth was watching Savonarola from afar. Soon after Savonarola was executed, Machiavelli entered the Florentine government as a secretary. His position quickly rose, however, and he was soon engaging in diplomatic missions. He met many of the important politicians of the day, such as the Pope and the King of France, but none had more impact on him than a prince of the Papal States, Cesare Borgia. Borgia was a cunning, cruel man, very much like the one portrayed in his book, a political treatise called *The Prince*. Machiavelli did not truly like Borgia's policies, but he thought that with a ruler like Borgia the Florentines could unite Italy, which was Machiavelli's goal throughout his life.

He tried to gain the favor of the Medici family who were ruling Florence then, by writing a book of what he thought were the Medici's goals and dedicating it to them. And so *The Prince* was written for that purpose. Unfortunately, the Medici didn't agree with what the book said, so he was out of a job. But when the public saw the book, they were outraged. The people wondered how cruel a man could be to think evil thoughts like the ones in *The Prince*, and that this would come back to haunt him. It sure did, and Machiavelli died a failed politician and bitter man.

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And so we have to ask how Machiavellian the forces that are arraigned against Malaysian palm oil are! Here, we have an industry that first offered the world an edible oil that was naturally rich in antioxidants and best of all, highly versatile, low in trans fats and pricing. With the rise in price of fossil fuels, oil palm offered an exciting alternative as a sustainable energy when blended as biodiesel and bio-fuel, as the oil produces the most energy of all vegetable oils for each unit of volume when burned.

But that's when the attacks began. First, the attacks focused on the allegedly unhealthy aspects of palm oil, arguing that the oil was artery clogging. When scientific evidence was brought to bear that the oil was, in fact, heart friendly and extremely healthy, these NGOs beat a hasty retreat to plan a new strategem.

When fossil fuels rose in price in 2006, and a world wide search for alternative fuels began, palm oil was a natural alternative as the oil was both cheap and clean and efficient as a fuel — so efficient that palm oil could even be blended directly with petroleum diesel without the need to convert it into an ester.

NGOs and Lobby Groups beholden to other competing oils now had to respond. Their revised strategem would have made Machiavelli proud. They now allege that the Malaysian palm oil industry together with the Indonesians have caused widespread environmental damage. So vociferous has been their campaign that "the outgoing Dutch Government is contemplating excluding palm oil from future subsidy plans to boost renewable energy," says State Secretary of Environment, Pieter Van Geel.

So extreme has been the knee jerk reaction of NGOs that some environmental organizations in the Netherlands even challenged in the Dutch High Court the building of a 50 megawatt power plant based on palm oil by the Dutch BioX Group. Fortunately, the Court after hearing arguments from both sides, rejected the NGOs claims that the plant did not lead to a reduction of greenhouse gases, which is blamed for global warming.

Let's examine the facts. The palm oil industry in Malaysia has been planting in an environment that is subject to some of the most stringent environmental laws in the world. With the passage of the Environmental Quality Act in 1974, the Government of Malaysia had signaled to the world as well as its agricultural industries that Malaysia is committed to the highest standards of environmental protection. Effluents from the palm oil industry is subject to stringent controls.

Malaysia as a whole has forest cover of more than 75% which is far greater than the countries from which these NGOs hail. Rather than pollute, these natural forest covers together with the palm oil plantations serving as planted forests, actually fulfill an important ecological function absorbing CO₂ and releasing oxygen into the world's atmosphere.

Sabah has in fact set aside more than 3.9 million hectares in its Deramakot Forest Reserve providing more than 60% of its land with natural forest cover with parks, wildlife sanctuaries and water catchment areas. The supreme irony is that the most vociferous NGOs hail from countries which have less than enviable conservation records.

Malaysia had also established a Palm Oil Wildlife Conservation Fund worth US\$5 Million for wildlife conservation and to

help the orang utan and other wildlife continue to flourish. In fact, initiatives have been put in place to purchase captured orang utans from neighboring countries for rehab and eventual release to the wild.

Malaysia was also one of the prime movers for the establishment of the Roundtable for Sustainable Palm Oil. The industry as a whole cooperates with local chapters of international NGOs such as the WWF to observe sustainable planting practices. But all these voluntary and responsible actions taken by the country and the oil palm plantations are not enough!

Such concerted and vociferous attacks in the face of overwhelming facts to the contrary can only lead one to conclude that some of these NGOs have vested interests in the issue, either as a proxy for some lobby group or are sadly misguided and misinformed. Exactly as Machiavelli would have prescribed it! THE END.