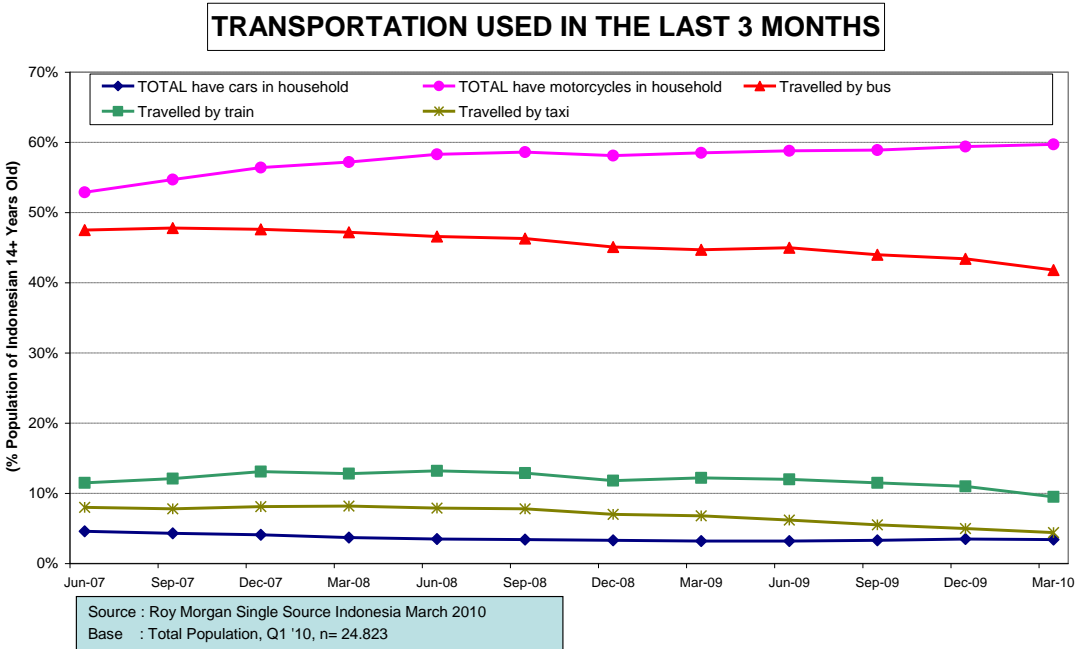


Lack of common-sense is not just jamming roads.

Jakarta’s chronic traffic jams are symbolic in many ways. The everyday picture of clogged arteries is the same in just about every big city in the country today. On the one hand, the growing number of cars and motorcycles choking the streets of metro Indonesia indicate a bustling economy, a growing affluence. On the other, it is a graphic illustration of the ineptitude of civic authorities.

Just last week this newspaper reported the estimated annual cost of Jakarta’s congestion at Rp. 26 trillion each year. And how much one wonders is the annualised cost of a mass transit system, without which the city is doomed for nothing other than paralysis? The pundits, the decision-makers, the experts are all in the city, witnesses every day. Organisations like Asian Development Bank and The World Bank must be waiting for somebody to have a serious conversation with them one of these days. It’s obvious that a public service like a monorail system isn’t going to make money for years. It’s equally obvious that no private-sector investor would have the stomach for it. But who will doubt the impact it would have?

Though the strangulation of the city began at least 20 years ago, the only sign Jakarta’s long-suffering millions have seen is the much-vaunted ‘Busway’. What hasn’t been curbed is the urge to issue permits for high-rise buildings, even in suburban neighbourhoods where the roads have no room for widening, no room for any more cars. Make that motorcycles too. Cars and motorcycles combined, the situation in a place like Jakarta’s trendy district of Kemang is ridiculous. Even more high-rise buildings are getting ready to open their doors. Crazy is a hopelessly inadequate word to describe the lack of planning in cities around the country. Civic authorities across the country can see the signs but can they connect all the dots?



In a short span of three years, the changing patterns in the use of transport reveals what's going on out there on the streets of Indonesia. While the population keeps growing each year, the percentage of people using buses has steadily gone down, from 48 per cent in June 2007, to 42 per cent as at the end of March 2010. Even in JABOTABEK, or Greater Jakarta, the bus-user population is going down from 85 per cent in June 2007, to 69 per cent at the end of March 2010. Nationally, trains are down from 12 to 10 per cent during the same period. The percentage of population using taxis has gone down as well, from 8 to 4 per cent. I should underline the fact that these numbers are national, not Jakarta alone or even the 'Top 20 Cities' combined. I should also point out that while the use of public transport may have gone down among casual and infrequent users, many in the growing workforce obviously use public transport in the course of their daily routine.

So where have all the other people gone? Or, to be more precise, how are they going? Private transport is the answer. When the authorities don't solve a problem, people tend to find their own solutions. Cars haven't really been the answer because the percentage of people with a car in the household has remained more or less constant at 4 per cent. What has continued to climb steadily are the numbers of people with a motorcycle in the household, moving up from 53 to 60 per cent of the population in just 3 years. As everybody knows, these 2-wheelers carry more than the two people they are designed for. Some households have more than one motorcycle. An incalculable number are also used as *ojeks*, or motorcycle taxis and their numbers appear to be growing as well, visibly.

The demand for new motorcycles continues to remain strong, a reflection of the consumer economy. That's because consumer confidence remains robust, in middle-Indonesia in particular. The dip in confidence during the January-March quarter affected the tiny percentage of affluent Indonesians thinking of buying a new car, with intentions sliding. They are the people with big disposable incomes, they buy all the new cars both big and small. They are the people most rattled by the political twists and turns at home, the ups and downs in bourses around the world. But when you consider the space a car occupies, at least as much as four 2-wheelers, one wonders where they are all going to fit in next year.

These opinions are based on data collected by Roy Morgan Single Source, the country's only syndicated survey that covers the cities, towns and villages of Indonesia. It covers over 15 major industries, over 150 product categories. With over 25,000 respondents each year, the data is updated every 90 days.

When you consider the amount of money congestion is actually costing each year, the pain it causes every day, the situation cries out for a real solution to the crisis. A mass transit system is a no-brainer. The impact of Bangkok's monorail system on its once legendary traffic jams is there for all to see. In the meantime, how difficult is it for Indonesia's metro authorities to discourage the use of cars in congested areas during peak traffic hours? What the city-state of Singapore has done over the years to control congestion is also common knowledge.

Common-sense, or rather the lack of it, is slowing Indonesia down. Literally.

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