

February 16, 2003

**SECTION:** Politics; Pg. 48

**LENGTH:** 1319 words

**HEADLINE:** A true political maverick

**BYLINE:** By Habhajan Singh

**HIGHLIGHT:**

Datuk M Kayveas is never too far from the limelight and controversy. From his suggestion that all Malaysians be granted Bumiputera status to his 'mini' Barisan Nasional proposal, the man has a proven knack of ensuring he and his party get more than their fair share of attention.

**BODY:**

IN his days as a student pilot in the 1970s, Datuk M Kayveas got a firm grip on the art of handling turbulence. During the 1990s, his pilot skills came in handy for the lawyer-turned-politician when he jumped into the fray of the People Progressive Party's (PPP) leadership tussle.

Nearly three decades later - now a senator as well as Deputy Minister of Housing and Local Government - his turbulence-handling skills are still being put to good use. The man keeps getting into controversial corners, some of which are self-created.

The latest is the suggestion to grant Bumiputera status to all Malaysians born after Merdeka. Not surprisingly, a number of Malay politicians responded ferociously. Some even called for his arrest for supposedly questioning Malay rights.

His justification for the suggestion, made at PPP's national assembly last October, is as follows. 'When it is convenient,' he tells Malaysian Business, 'we publicly talk about creating the one race, the Malaysian race. But when we go back, who are we? We don't have this Malaysianisation in us.'

A political gimmick? Well, PPP has reason to keep a high profile. The once high-flying Opposition party remains high and dry when it comes to elected members. At the moment, it has none. This is in stark contrast to its heyday when propelled by the likes of the late D R Seenivasagam and his brother S P Seenivasagam.

In the early 1960s, the Seenivasagam brothers and 14 other party colleagues won a majority in the Ipoh Municipal Council. Hoping for better times, PPP hopes to secure a couple of seats in the next general elections.

Officially, the party leadership has requested for 12 parliamentary and 24 state seats. Will they get it?

'In politics, you have to ask for more,' quips Kayveas. 'We are asking because there are plenty of new seats. I don't see how existing

political

parties can take on all these new seats.' In the on-going constituency redelineation exercise, Parliament may see 29 new seats being created while total state seats will increase by 59.

When working out seat allocations, certain quarters still deem PPP as an Indian-based party. Any seat going to it will mean one less for Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), the traditional Indian voice in the present Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition.

However, Kayveas disagrees on the point of PPP being an Indian-based party. 'That's a misconception,' he asserts. 'My deputy is Chinese. We have a well-balanced membership with about 57 per cent of them Indians.'

By year-end, Kayveas claims the party's membership will swell to 400,000. And they are all supposed to be registered voters. 'In our membership card, we specify where they vote,' he says. PPP is banking on this proclaimed strength to thrust its representatives back into Parliament.

Kayveas has a well-established knack for grabbing the national limelight. The latest: a 'mini' BN venture. He intends to group smaller political parties - those supporting the 14-party BN coalition but unable to gain membership into it - to secure some kind of backdoor foothold.

This proposal would include the likes of the Punjabi People's Party, Parti Kongres Indian Muslim Malaysia (Kimma), Malaysian Ceylonese Congress and the All Malaysian Malayali Association (Amma). 'They are interested in politics and want to join BN,' he says. 'But the BN process cannot be abused for fear of breakaway parties coming back in the name of new parties.'

Hence, PPP's associate membership offer to these small parties. In return, naturally, it hopes to spread the party's influence. But will all these efforts earn PPP and Kayveas extra brownie points? His appointment to a deputy ministerial post in January 2001 was for an earlier recognition. The coming elections may provide the next. Or, at least, PPP leaders hope so.

Malaysian Business caught up with Kayveas amidst his busy schedule to get some views from this sometimes controversial politician. What is your vision for the party?

When elected president, I conducted a study to rebuild the party. We concluded that PPP is a party for the future. This is because Malaysian politics is still heavily race-based. It's like a pair of railway tracks, going in a parallel direction but never meeting.

The ideal political situation should be one party. You cannot have three race-based parties. With the Barisan Nasional, we are already there. As a multi-racial party, PPP can be the forerunner to this.

In today's real politik, isn't PPP a race-based party?

The reason it looks like an Indian-based party is that, by nature, Indians tend to come out. You ask them to hold flags, they're out there. You ask them to attend a function, they're out there. They have the volunteerism spirit in them.

But some quarters perceive PPP as an Indian-centric party?

That's a misconception. You should take a look at our functions. In Perak, eight out of 10 functions are run totally by the Chinese. I will be the only Indian sitting there. In Batu Pahat, we don't have even one Indian member. What about Malay members?

Earlier, before the Keadilan issue, when many Malays showed an interest (in joining PPP), I was pre-warned not to take them in. So, we were cautious. Who gave that 'ultimatum'?

Some very senior political figures. It was to avoid splitting Malays. Malay unity is important for Malaysia. They are the pillars of the Barisan Nasional.

After the Keadilan issue, I realised that it was bad advice. We lost a lot of Malays who did not have an alternative. Since national politics is very much race-driven, where does a multiracial and small party like PPP fit in the system?

First, I don't consider ourselves small. By year end, we will have close to 400,000 members. We must grow bigger so that that the race-based parties become smaller. It's a matter of time.

Umno has broken into four different parties. MCA has split a few times. Gerakan is a breakaway from it. MCA members once left to takeover PPP. Now, you have a Team A and Team B. MIC has broken into DMIP, IPF and lately, another Indian party.

These parties will always have this breakaway problem. But a multiracial party, even after breaking apart, will always remain multiracial. But there is already Gerakan which is supposed to be another multiracial party in the BN fold?

They call themselves a multiracial party but conduct their meetings in Chinese. In PPP, we don't even talk in English, but in Bahasa Malaysia. We only allow other languages if all members are from that particular race and want to express something in that particular language. PPP has requested for some 12 parliamentary seats and about two dozen state seats? How do you view your chances?

I don't see how existing political parties can take on all these new seats (after redelineation). Everyone is talking about new faces and changes. There, you have PPP. With a new set-up, a new life and people who are willing to serve. But it's an untested team. Can they make the cut?

They can take me as an example. If I don't perform, I should not be there. You previously suggested granting of Bumiputera status to non-Malays. Do you still hold that view?

I am not propagating it. I am not going around conducting ceramahs on it. It was merely a suggestion.

Indonesian and Bangladeshis come here as foreign workers. They marry

local girls and their families get Bumiputera status. On the other hand, the Chinese and Indians have been here way before Merdeka, but still have questions as to their status. When I went to London as a student, I was a Malaysian. When I went to China, I was a Malaysian. When I went to India recently, I was a Malaysian. But when I come back to Malaysia, I suddenly become an Indian.

In that light, my suggestion is worth a look. I am not talking about taking away Malay rights.

**GRAPHIC:** Kayveas' suggestion that all Malaysians be granted Bumiputera status earned the wrath of a number of Malay politicians. Personal elevation: Kayveas' signing-in ceremony as deputy minister.

**LOAD-DATE:** March 20, 2003