



Malaysian Indians; Samy Vellu: seeking assurances.

MALAYSIA

I'm saying yes, no

Mahathir fails to ease Indians' fears of discrimination

By Suhaini Aznam in Kuala Lumpur

In the past few weeks, the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) — Malaysia's only Indian-based political party and a component member of the ruling National Front — has turned the spotlight on alleged hiring discrimination against Malaysian Indians in government service. But Indians attending the 20-21 July MIC annual party congress, who hoped for some assurance that the problem would be resolved, were disappointed.

Guest speaker Prime Minister Datuk Seri Mahathir Mohamad dashed their hopes when he told the congress: "All I have to say is yes and everything would happen. And I am saying yes. Unfortunately, I can say yes, but nothing will happen." Because of Mahathir's uncharacteristically confusing remark, it took the delegates several moments before his message began to hit home and, even then, the MIC leadership tried to interpret it in the best light possible.

Mahathir had earlier been displeased when MIC president Datuk S. Samy Vellu had aired his grievances on the alleged discrimination at a Federal Territory conference on 17 June when, as a full government minister, he had more private avenues of seeking the prime minister's attention. But if the prime minister wanted to show that voicing racial complaints in public would only hinder their cause, that message escaped the assembly.

Nevertheless, MIC leaders said they were not discouraged by Mahathir's words. Samy Vellu says he remains optimistic. "He [Mahathir] has taken stock of our problems. I know he likes to work quietly. I will now present the case in a more acceptable forum," he said, referring to cabinet channels.

Although delegates were disappointed that Mahathir had not addressed the detailed points Samy Vellu had raised, the party congress this year was remarkable for the good humour that prevailed. Unlike previous years when infighting for party posts had included throwing chairs across the convention floor, this congress concentrated its energies on Indian education, employment and investment — and requests for increased representation in the next election.

At the congress, Mahathir tried to warn the Indian community against making unreasonable demands. But that message too seems to have been lost on the delegates. Mahathir had pointed out that in no constituency did Indians form a majority — a remark which stung some Indians. Mahathir also belittled the importance of Indian votes to the overall National Front victory, said some delegates.

Political representation by race for Malaysia's Indians, which make up about 8.5% of the population, is con-

lined to the MIC. Although not a majority in any one constituency, Indian voters can form a decisive voting block in up to 30% of the parliamentary constituencies, said MIC deputy president Datuk S. Subramaniam. Election workers of the United Malays National Organisation (Umno), the leading party in the National Front, recognise Malaysian Indians as loyal National Front voters.

On a more personal level, Indian political observers note that Samy Vellu now faces a self-made predicament. Within the party, he wants to be seen championing Indian interests before a younger leader upstages him, observers said, who recall the embarrassing heights reached in 1981 when the so-called Samy-Subra (Subramaniam) rivalry came to the fore during MIC factional fighting.

The fear of possible new rivals, the observers said, prompted Samy Vellu's emotional declaration at the party congress that "I'm not afraid to step down, but nobody can shut my mouth even if I do step down," in response to a few Umno Youth divisions which had demanded a public apology from Samy Vellu for speaking out on 14 June against alleged unfair treatment of Indians in the predominantly Malay state of Kelantan and his allegations about discrimination against Indians in government service. One Umno youth leader, Tamrin Ghaffar, has suggested Samy Vellu resign as minister given that he seemed unable to differentiate between his party and ministerial roles.

Yet despite his occasional outbursts, Samy Vellu is criticised by some Malaysian Indians for not standing up enough to Mahathir: on a few occasions he has referred affectionately to Umno as "big brother." And when Mahathir asked him how he felt about his (Mahathir's) speech at the MIC annual assembly, Samy Vellu assured the prime minister that "we are not disappointed. We have full confidence in your leadership and are sure that you will understand our dilemma." Samy Vellu has to tread carefully with Mahathir on whom he depends for his political life as minister of works.

Even some non-MIC politicians saw Samy Vellu as backpedalling after receiving the sharp criticism offered up by Umno. By speaking out publicly on 17 June about alleged discrimination in government service and then saying on 28 June that the matter has been publicly dropped, Samy Vellu had done more harm than good to his cause, said a National Front MP.

His present position was summed up by another politician quoting a Malay saying: *Kalau berani jolok sarang tebuan, mestilah berani rasa sengatnya* (if you dare disturb the hornet's nest, so must you brave its sting). □