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Defining who's in the 'middle class' still proves elusive

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EVER since the Prime Minister talked about the need to increase the number of middle-class Bumiputera businessmen in March there has been a flurry of activities by the relevant agencies and organisations, and numerous statements averring the sentiments of Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Suddenly it is discovered that Mara, an authority set up a long time ago to help Bumiputeras and create an entrepreneurial class has not done enough and State economic development corporations were directed to help.

Soon numerous leaders were echoing the sentiments that the pool of middle-class Bumiputera entrepreneurs must be enlarged.

The Education Ministry came in with the need to increase middle-class Bumiputera professionals and technocrats.

The effort is on going.

But, really, who are these people we term as middle class.

Everyone seems to think they know who are in the middle class and who are not. A popular definition is members of society occupying a socio-economic position between the working class and the wealthy.

Last week it was the topic of the Malaysian Research Studies roundtable discussion.

Those who took part in the discussions included prominent researchers and academicians such as Prof Jomo K. Sundram, Abdul Rahman Embong, Norani Othman, statistician Tan Poo Chang and Dr Rahimah Abdul Aziz.

They each tried to identify the middle class in Malaysian society and also the criteria by which Bumiputeras fall within this class in their own community and within Malaysian society.

Abdul Rahman, a sociologist known for his studies on the middle class, in his paper titled "Malaysian Middle Class Studies: A Brief Overview", identified the middle class in traditional society as the golongan bangsawan or nobility.

He said that since this group was placed between the royalty and the masses, they could be referred to as the "middle class".

The "new middle class" in Malaysia are those descendants of the nobility who had been recruited into the civil service.

Sociologist Rahimah discussed the making of the "middle class". It was an exhaustive discussion and it methodically and scientifically explained the historical emergence of the Malaysian middle class(es) and some of their characteristics found today.

While it was quite difficult to really pin down those that could be said as belonging to that class, she said the middle class is the group of people who fit in neither the nobility nor the peasantry.

In pre-independent Malaysia, they were called the new classes as they fit in nowhere - consisting of European bourgeoisie, Chinese compradors, Indian chettiars, a small group of European officers, junior Malay administrators, Asian white collar employees and a growing proletariat (mainly Chinese and Indian).

She said: "The social formation called the middle class(es) - being a category in the middle - is definitely elusive to define and poses boundary problems with classes above and below them.

"For example, where can we draw the boundary between the middle and upper classes, as well as between the middle and lower classes? At the same time, the middle class itself is internally differentiated, making it more realistic conceptually and empirically to refer to them as consisting

of the new middle class, old middle class and marginal middle class - hence the preference for the usage of the term in the plural - middle classes - as employed in this paper, rather than the singular.

"The internal differentiations make it almost impossible to speak of the middle classes as a 'class for itself' in terms of ideological orientation and political mobilisation, since they are not clearly bounded, nor cohesive social wholes."

Jomo in his paper "A Malaysian Middle Class?: Some Preliminary Analytical Considerations" plays it safe with the term.

"The notion of the middle class is generally recognised to be problematic.

"It is understood rather differently by those involved in marketing, economic and sociological research. Even among sociologists, there are various different approaches ..."

He said the middle class would best be identified by their occupations.

"While convenient, the occupational approach also lends itself to providing evidence of a clearly bounded, reasonably coherent and self-conscious middle class," he admitted.

Jomo spoke of the confusion of the sociologists and researchers by stating that "beyond the loose and broad definitions, there is little consensus as sociologists and others disagree over more precise or exact definitions of the term middle class".

He said that it was difficult to actually speak of a "middle class" as if it were a coherent class.

"It is not my intention to insist on a particular definition here, but I want to emphasise that in so far as the term refers to two rather different social categories - one defined in terms of size and nature of business involvement and capital accumulation, and the other in terms of status, function and/or (ambiguous or contradictory) class location - we cannot really speak of a middle class as if it were a coherent class.

"Nevertheless, it seems possible to speak of a petty or small bourgeoisie, or 'old middle class', as well as of a 'new middle class', though we may disagree over precise definitions."

Tan said that she did a sample study of the people in Klang Valley (whom she thinks fit into the 'middle class' category).

But at the outset she admitted that only a loose definition of the term "middle class" was possible - "a group of persons with fairly high earnings in managerial, professional and other white collar positions".

She also admitted that her study was limited. The sample included active Malaysian citizens, between the age of 30 and 55 years, reflecting the ethnic, sex and occupational distribution in the Klang Valley, using the 1991 Population Census.

The discussion on the "middle class" ended as an academic exercise.

A lot of views were aired but a definitive definition of the term "middle class" did not emerge.

But many among the audience were quite clear as to who formed the middle class.

Their understanding might be just impressionistic but, there is no doubt, it is this understanding that is going to provide a working definition for those involved in enlarging the pool of middle-class Bumiputera entrepreneurs.

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