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Government urged to lead the way

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THE Government, which has been instrumental in the creation of a Bumiputera upper-class group, has to lead the effort in expanding the number of middle-class Bumiputeras.

Malay Chamber of Commerce deputy chairman Syed Amin Al-Jeffri said that at present, those in the upper-class category are limited in number and financial strength to make the effort a success.

"There are only some 10 to 20 Malay industrialists. The bases of their conglomerates are very limited. They do not have the capacity to do it alone," he told Business Times in Kuala Lumpur yesterday.

Syed Amin was commenting on Prime Minister and Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's call for the expansion of the pool of middle-class Bumiputeras.

Dr Mahathir said after an Umno Supreme Council meeting on Tuesday that the movement has succeeded in creating a Bumiputera upper-class who are very involved in economic activities, but middle-class Bumiputeras have yet to match the middle-class of other races.

Syed Amin said that in addition to the limited financial strength, these top Malay industrialists have to ensure their conglomerates excel and perform continuously to gain the Government's trust.

"They are trapped in a difficult position. Their focus is more profit-oriented to ensure their companies grow. Any effort to assist in nurturing a Bumiputera middle-class group will sacrifice their top performance," he added.

Perhaps, Syed Amin said, when it comes to assessing the conglomerates' achievements, the mentality needs to be changed so that the top Malay industrialists dare take on a bigger responsibility in grooming middle-class Bumiputeras.

"The performance of companies owned by top Bumiputeras must not be assessed in terms of profits alone. Other factors such as their contributions in helping other Bumiputera entrepreneurs to excel should be taken into consideration," he added.

Syed Amin said the Prime Minister's call shows that Government is now taking a new approach in distributing the economic activities in the country.

Meanwhile, local economists said it is important that the Bumiputera middle-class group be expanded since they form the base of the community's economic strength.

"We cannot rely too much on the upper-class group to move an economy to a higher platform. It has always been the middle-class who play the key role. They are the backbone of the economy," an economist said.

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