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Economic issues expected to dominate MIC assembly discussions

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THE country's economic problems and how they have affected the Indian community will be foremost on the minds of delegates to the 52nd MIC general assembly tomorrow.

With the majority of them being wage earners and the community lagging behind the Malays and Chinese in economic wealth, delegates are expected to discuss economic issues in depth, placing them as equally important as education and social issues which are normally hotly debated.

MIC president Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu is expected to explain, in his presidential address before 1,350 delegates and 115 invited guests, the measures being taken under the National Economic Recovery Plan.

He will also pledge the party's support for the Government and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad who will open the assembly.

The assembly will be a one-day affair at the Hotel Sheraton Subang in Subang Jaya as opposed to the two days usually spent at the Putra World Trade Centre, next door to party headquarters.

Clearly, it's a sign of the times.

MIC secretary-general Tan Sri K.S. Nijhar said RM550,000 was spent last year organising the assembly but as a cost-cutting measure, less than half, or approximately RM275,000, had been budgeted this year.

"Economic woes would be on the delegates' minds as they mostly represent members who are wage earners, many of them manual workers in businesses, offices, factories and plantations, and therefore exposed to the possibilities of retrenchment and rising prices," said a senior party leader.

He said many were now wondering whether their children would have jobs when they leave universities and colleges.

"It was a blessing that Indians did not have the economic strength to venture into the stock market in a big way although the party had been urging them at one point. Luckily, not many of them had their fingers burned when share prices plummeted," he pointed out.

Samy Vellu will also talk about education, a matter very close to his heart.

He will be addressing the general assembly on the subject just two weeks after triumphantly announcing the Kedah Government's approval of a 157-hectare site in Semeling, Sungai Petani, for the party's proposed RM200 million university.

Also in the pipeline is the Ipoh Technical Institute in Perak. These two institutions would ensure access to 12,000 places.

Samy Vellu had previously said that there was not enough places for Indian students, that this year alone about 400 of them failed to secure places in public institutions.

He is also expected to reiterate the importance of contributing RM25 a month to the Koperasi Didik Bhd fund, an education arm of the MIC, to provide higher education loans.

During the MIC's Youth and Women's assemblies last month, Samy Vellu had chided the two wings for failing to set up a task force in each division to educate the grassroots on the need for the contribution.

MIC central working committee member Datuk V.K.K. Teagarajan said the party president was aware that education was the key for the economic uplifting of the Indian community and had been working hard to provide education opportunities for Indian youth.

"Koperasi Didik is one way of instilling the saving habit among Indians to plan for their children's higher education, and the president is pushing that," Teagarajan said.

Resolutions to be tabled would be on the support for Dr Mahathir, the NERP, education and estate workers.

There would also be a debate on amendments to the party's constitution, among which is one to give State liaison chiefs more clout in party affairs.

A party insider said in the past, division chiefs wielded power over branches under them.

"They were like shota maharajahs (small kings) and decided on all matters. State liaison chiefs often felt they were by-passed as these maharajahs took matters direct to the CWC," he said.

Nijhar, however, said the move was to increase administrative efficiency.

Also to be debated would be amendments to increase the number of appointed CWC members from seven to nine and the party's life membership fee from RM100 to RM500.

Asked about the state of the party leadership, Teagarajan said: "Party stability is 'A-One' at this time. I have never seen the party more united and committed to party objectives."

Teagarajan said with more members coming from the business community and other professions, the party now had both quantity and quality.

The party has also been wooing the Sikh community since last year with Samy Vellu allowing Sikh branches to be set up with just 50 members - down from the required 100.

MIC Jalan Wak (Bukit Kayangan, Shah Alam) chairman Dr Mohan Singh said there were now more than 2,000 Sikh members in 21 branches, with another 30 branches approved by the CWC.

"The Sikhs have had a very good reception from the MIC. Being very new we were not able to complete our meetings to be eligible as delegates but have been invited as observers," Dr Mohan said.

On the social front, Samy Vellu is expected to announce the registration of the party's Social Strategic Foundation to tackle social ills, needs and problems of the Indian community.

The foundation's executive director, sociologist Dr Denison Jayasooria, said the foundation was a progression of the party's Social Recovery Programme begun in 1996 and the setting up of its Social Strategic Unit last year.

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