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Why Indian voters will stick with BN

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AT the recent MIC general assembly, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad made a statement in apparent reference to the problems associated with the South Indian Labour Fund and monthly wages for estate workers.

He said that too much conflict within the Indian community might affect its effective representation in the Government and Cabinet. He added that they should not blame other ethnic groups if such a situation arose.

Is the Indian community so politically divided for Dr Mahathir to make the remark? Actually, political conflict in the community is not a phenomenon; like other ethnic groups it too has its share of problems.

The MIC is still looked upon by the majority of Indians for political representation and to resolve some of their perplexing problems. While parties such as the People's Progressive Party and Indian Progressive Front tend to compete with the MIC for Indian support, their performance is not up to the mark. Being composed of Indians who were originally with the MIC, these parties do not have a strong traditional base of support.

Furthermore, not being in the Government, these parties are not in a position to compete with the MIC which has to some degree a well-oiled patronage machinery. And while the PPP professes to be multi-racial in character, the IPF is purely Indian-based and suffers from a lack of members.

The perception that the MIC has little grassroots support and that its candidates invariably depend upon the Malay vote during general elections cannot be held anymore. This perception has not done anything good for the party.

Senior government leaders have often ridiculed the party for its dependence on Umno and not taken its demands seriously. Today the scenario is quite different.

Given the split in the Malay community over the Anwar factor, in the coming election, the Barisan Nasional, and Umno in particular, stands to lose some measure of Malay support.

Because of this, Barisan would have to depend on the Chinese and Indian vote.

This time Umno needs the support of Indian voters who constitute about 10-15 per cent of the electorate in many constituencies. As one prominent political scientist puts it: "In the coming election, Umno will have to be saved by the non-Malays."

Needless to say, the problem is not just the Government or Umno. The MIC has its share of problems.

The party's dependence on its president Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu has, among other things, curtailed the emergence of a second and third echelon of leaders.

Often, the community expects Samy Vellu to resolve problems himself.

Many party leaders are mere functionaries with little or no imagination in terms of steering the party into the new millennium. Being too dependent on the president they have failed to develop plans and strategies for the material and spiritual improvement of the community.

The Indian community's frustration is not with the MIC alone. While some Indians think that the party has fundamentally neglected them, the majority believe the Government as a whole is equally responsible.

There is a growing perception that if the Government does not take the MIC seriously, then the party is not in a position to take up and resolve

the problems faced by the community.

The MIC cannot be strengthened by merely increasing its membership; the Government has to play the crucial role to overcome economic, social, and cultural problems faced by the community.

For instance, the poor in-take of Indian students by universities and the lack of facilities in the private sector for the material improvement of Indians have not been seriously addressed even though these issues were raised by the MIC.

Despite the neglect, Indians are still loyal to the Barisan. Except for 1990 when quite a number of them voted for Gagasan Rakyat, Indians have a predilection for the ruling coalition.

In the coming election, some sections of the urban workforce might support the DAP. Parties such as Keadilan and Pas will not get Indian support.

The majority of Indians will support Barisan not because it has done wonders for them, but simply on a realisation that the Opposition's so-called alliance is no alternative at all.

But then, Indian support for the Barisan and the MIC cannot be taken for granted in the decades to come, as urbanisation will pave the way for the development of more radical consciousness in the community.

Meanwhile, ethnic imbalances and the socio-economic deprivation of the Indian community mean that solutions to their problems will have to be sought within the Barisan frame-work.

First, the absence of a viable political alternative to the ruling coalition means Indians will have no choice but to go along with Barisan. Second, the community, being a deprived segment of the population still needs considerable assistance from the Government.

Such assistance will not be forthcoming if Indians do not support the Barisan or do not have their representative in the Government or Cabinet.

Third, the MIC despite its inability to fulfil the demands of the community in many areas, still enjoys considerable cultural legitimacy to provide representation for the community, even if this can be described as symbolic.

Fourth, it is widely held that Indians without representation in the Government will tend to suffer from fundamental neglect.