

IPF chief's heart very much

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Indian Progressive Front president Datuk M.G. Pandithan speaks candidly about his expulsion from the MIC in 1988 and his 'difficult' relationship since then with MIC president Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu. In this exclusive interview with BALAN MOSES and PATRICK SENNYAH, Pandithan talks about the future for the IPF in the light of recent developments.

Q: The IPF and the MIC have been at loggerheads since you set it up in 1989 after leaving the MIC. What were your reasons for setting up the IPF?

A: It is not the IPF which has been at loggerheads with the MIC but the other way around. The IPF has a mission for the downtrodden who deserve better treatment. We have a role to play to alleviate this problem and let them have the same status as other Indians.

I have been going around to awaken the others to their plight and help the downtrodden not to feel inferior to others. It has been drummed into their heads that they could only follow and not lead and I want to educate them and instil in them the talent and strength they have.

Numbers in any democratic country are important and they have the numbers. They must understand they are important in the country.

IPF wants to lead them to the proper path and teach them to be leaders and not followers. I am a good example of one who came up from a poor family and have done well for myself.

My vision is to help these people come up in life. I thought the MIC was the proper place for me to help them. I became a member even while studying and my thinking was to help these people.

It was only in 1977 when I began contesting (posts in the MIC) that I learnt of the caste system and I thought to myself that I must help these people.

I was not willing to accept any appointed post and I wanted to contest myself and win. That's why I asked Samy (Vellu) for a copy of the constitution to understand what it spoke of the rights of expelled members.

I never asked to amend the constitution. I only wanted a copy to have a look at the latest developments. I never asked for amendments. I only wanted to read about expelled members. I asked Samy

(Vellu) for a proposal.

Before harping on anything, you must have a plan on how you are going to accommodate us. We have more than 500,000 members and supporters. Ours is a family party.

We have 380,000 members and will be registering more. Ours is a small party and with what we have, we are doing our best.

We have no aid from anyone, only the subscription collected from members. They are committed.

We have 100 divisions. More than 30 are important to the Barisan Nasional. They can tilt the results of an election.

Q: Why do you think Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu is inviting you and your members back into the MIC fold after 12 years?

A: It's all Hebrew (sic) to me. I don't know. As I have said, people tend to look at the negative side. For once we must give him the benefit of doubt. We have to look at it positively.

That's why I asked him for a proposal. I'm no longer a follower and I can't just do what Samy Vellu wants.

Those days when I was an MIC member, it was different because he was my leader. Now I must ask him about the plan. I'm not your wife.

What is Samy Vellu's stand? I don't want to be punished a second time. No one can divorce me from the people I belong to. I don't know why he has invited me now especially since my delegates' conference is round the corner.

But as I have said, although I take a serious note of this, I have to concentrate on the conference.

Admittance to MIC is secondary to me. We must make sure nothing goes wrong at the conference. I must make my physical presence to show we are strong and we are good organisers. We must not let IPF down.

Q: There are currently two other parties — the People's Progressive

Party and the Gerakan — besides the MIC and IPF looking after the interests of Indians. Wouldn't a merger of the IPF and MIC lead to greater cohesiveness among the Indians?

A: It's a good idea for two Indian-based parties to merge. But the style and ideas are different.

Samy Vellu has two roles to play, that of political leader and another of community leader in the broader spectrum.

I have two roles to play also. One is a community role, especially where the grassroots community, which needs much attention and focus, is concerned.

These people need more attention and care because I see that they have been neglected. Why are there so many problems in the grassroots Indian community?

These problems concern housing, health, gangsterism, etc. You name it, you can find it here at the grassroots. My role is different from Samy Vellu's.

Samy Vellu should take better care of the grassroots. If he had focused on this community earlier, the question of my expulsion would not have arisen. I suspect that people still want the grassroots community to remain in the dark for many years to come. This is why the grassroots Indian community needs special care.

You can see that the grassroots community lacks attention and after my 12-year struggle, their problems are coming to light.

I have an opportunity to speak of these problems on an IPF platform. I did not have this chance in the MIC. I also risk being sacked again,

with grassroots community

if not by Samy Vellu, by some other leader, if I bring the issue of the interests of the grassroots if I ever join the MIC. I have succeeded in bringing up so many leaders and they feel more secure in IPF.

They are like brothers and sisters, showing off their talents without any hesitation or restriction. I'm one example. If I have that kind of talent, surely thousands of others (in the IPF) have that, too. If you join the MIC, it is back to square one and the voice of the majority at the grassroots level will not be heard.

A separate identity is better where we can co-operate to work for the betterment of the community. There will be no suspicion among us. You will not worry about me taking over and I don't have to worry about being sacked.

Q: Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad recently stated that the IPF's entry into the Barisan Nasional had been held up by the lack of consensus among BN component parties. If the IPF decides not to merge with either the MIC or the PPP, will this not place the IPF back in the political wilderness?

A: There is nothing wrong in two Indian-based parties in the BN. There are Malay and Chinese-based parties working in the BN. No one should suspect IPF's intentions.

We could both work together for the betterment of the people. I still feel there is room for two Indian-based parties to play their roles affectively. It's not easy to rejoin the MIC.

Samy Vellu has been calling me

and there are lots of unwarranted comments from (Datuk M.) Kayveas.

Kayveas was childish to say Pandithan should go to the MIC. Some IPF members won't like it. And then he said the disgruntled group in IPF could join PPP.

If you think they would be disgruntled, then why do you advise me to go (to the MIC)?

Kayveas only saw Samy Vellu's version of it. He never asked IPF members about it. Kayveas then said I couldn't come into the PPP and that he would only accept my members. I'm not interested in any offer. If my members decide to go, then let them go. I only hope they will not join the opposition.

If all the members choose PPP, then the choice is up to them. Pandithan is immaterial. Leave me alone. If they choose their future, I don't want to stand in their path.

Q: You have been fiercely loyal to the Barisan Nasional since leaving the Gagasan Rakyat in 1995. Despite overtures from the opposition, why have you stuck with the BN?

A: We see a bright future for the IPF because more than 85 per cent of my members are youngsters. They are 21 to 40 years old. We are a party of the future.

If the IPF is taken into the BN, we will have one million members after that. What some people have been unable to do for 20 years, I can do in five to 10 years which is to unite the Indian community. I can join the opposition, but then I can't do anything for the people.

The Government in power can do

something for them. The down-trodden Indians need special care and the MIC is not taking care of them. I have to take care of them.

With close rapport with BN leaders, we can do a lot for them. The IPF does not feel that it is not in the BN. The PM has a soft spot for us and all Umno leaders like us. I'm dedicated and sincere.

I have totally rejected invitations to meet the opposition. We are putting more emphasis that we need a place in the BN. The MIC wants to put us in a dilemma where we are political untouchables.

But once we are in the BN, we will see who commits political suicide. I am not a quitter but a fighter. I play my part. You have to have your own way.

The only stumbling block is Samy Vellu and the MIC. The rest of them accept us. It is very difficult to convince IPF members to work with the MIC.

I try to convince them although they (MIC) oppose our entry into the BN. Our perception is to look at it from a broad spectrum. IPF workers are prepared to sacrifice their time without getting a single sen.

We cough up our own money. I will not be the loser, if IPF is not accepted into the BN. The BN will be the loser.

Umno, MCA and Gerakan are helping us although our relationship with the MIC is not so cordial. If the IPF joined the BN, we will be duty-bound to help the MIC. Now I can choose to help the other component parties and not the MIC.

Q: Are your differences with Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu settled as both of you seem to be on "friendly terms" recently, especially during the Lunas and Teluk Kemang by-elections?

A: I took him to be my leader when I was in the MIC. I took him as a great leader. At that point, I wanted to be a follower. I loved him so much.

Just because of politics, he had done so much (against me).

I apologised although I did not do anything to him. I have never uttered anything bad about Samy Vellu. I want to fight him democratically. I'm prepared to take him on.

I am willing to even sacrifice my head, if you are my friend. But if you are my enemy, I'm prepared to take your head off (said in Tamil)."