

25/01/2001

Samy Vellu's olive branch to Pandithan a positive development

Balan Moses

UNITY seems to be the buzzword on the political scene with Umno setting the pace with Pas and the MIC following suit with the Indian Progressive Front.

In as much as the proposed Umno-Pas talks are deemed significant within the Malay community, so is the olive branch offered by MIC president Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu to IPF president Senator Datuk M. G. Pandithan among Indians.

The possible rapprochement between the two political giants in the Indian community is eliciting special interest as it comes after 13 years of estrangement between the erstwhile friends.

Acquainted for the best part of 35 years, they complemented each other in MIC politics until that fateful day in July, 1988, when Pandithan was expelled for allegedly bringing a coffin to party headquarters after learning he would be sacked for indiscipline.

One of the youngest vice-presidents in MIC history at 39, he was on the fast lane.

Political observers, therefore, were sure the two would never be on the same platform again, given the particularly acrimonious manner in which they parted ways.

Yet, Samy Vellu's quite unexpected call for a truce gives currency to the age-old adage that there are no permanent enemies in politics.

His assurance yesterday that Pandithan would not come in as an ordinary member and hint that the IPF leader could expect to be appointed to the Central Working Committee is further proof of his determination to bring the IPF leader back.

That Pandithan is prepared to consider the invitation after emphatically stating in the past that he will not rejoin the MIC is a positive development.

It appears that the "pull" factors far outweigh the "push" factors with both sides awaiting a positive signal from the other.

For the MIC and Samy Vellu, Pandithan's return and that of his supporters will shore up its position in the Barisan Nasional, especially in the wake of the People's Progressive Party's especially good showing recently in the national front.

That the predominantly-Indian PPP also entered Government recently by way of the appointment of its president Datuk M. Kayveas as deputy housing minister has not been lost on MIC leaders, many of whom have been worried by the growing influence wielded by the former Perak-based party.

In terms of numbers, it will add on a claimed 200,000 IPF membership to the 800,000 already on the MIC rolls.

It is understood that Samy Vellu explained in great detail over two hours at Tuesday's Central Working Committee meeting the need for unity within the community and why Pandithan was needed back in the party.

State party chiefs present are said to have endorsed the party president's views, affirming the need for a party that could claim to represent most Indians.

As far as the IPF is concerned, it will bring Pandithan out of the political wilderness into the mainstream of political life.

While he has consistently alligned himself and the IPF with the Barisan Nasional over the past six years since leaving the opposition-based Gagasan Rakyat, he has never quite been recognised as a political leader

in his own right.

As long as the MIC stood as the obstacle to the IPF's entry into the Barisan Nasional, the party was always on the sidelines.

Pandithan never regained the influence that he wielded as MIC vice-president despite the party's strong support for the BN in the 1999 general election and the Teluk Kemang and Lunas by-elections last year.

But the BN leadership did take notice of him in other ways with his appointment as senator in 1995 and the subsequent conferrment of a Datukship.

It went to show that the IPF's support for the BN was appreciated and that the MIC could no longer afford to ignore Pandithan.

To use a well-worn cliché, the invitation from Samy Vellu may be the light at the end of the tunnel for Pandithan and the IPF.

At this juncture, both parties should assess and come to terms with the reality of bringing the IPF and Pandithan back into the ranks of the MIC.

There is bound to be some measure of caution among MIC members over the possible entry of IPF members, although they may be former comrades in arms.

Have MIC members forgiven Pandithan and his supporters for leaving the party?

Are they ready to forgive and forget the acrimony of the past decade, especially IPF's five-year foray into opposition politics as part of the Gagasan Rakyat?

Of course, the strong support for admission of IPF's members into MIC at the higher levels will pave the way for a general consensus among other segments of the party.

IPF members, on the other hand, should not expect anything more than to be ordinary members who should earn their stripes over time.

In short, there will be a need for compromise between both sides for an amicable settlement of dues.

Pandithan and his fellow IPF leaders should take a page from Umno history and look at the disbanding of Semangat 46 in 1996 to join the former.

It was done to reunite Umno and Semangat 46 for the general good of the community after Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah left to form Samangat 46 after losing out in the contest for Umno president.

IPF members should feel a legitimate need to join the MIC and give the party greater credibility in the eyes of the voting public.

Note should also be taken of the fact that Tengku Razaleigh was only appointed Kelantan liaison committee head two years and eight months after rejoining Umno as an ordinary member.

It is understood that the IPF will hold a secret ballot next month to let members decide on whether to remain in the party or join other BN component parties.

Pandithan's predominant position in the party will determine which way the decision will go.

Both MIC and IPF should take heed of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's recent reminder that in any negotiating situation, no one can get all that they want.

It is in both MIC and IPF's interest, therefore, to be realistic and practical if and when they come to the negotiating table.

(END)