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Suqiu sets aside seven points (HL)

Sarban Singh; Hizreen Kamal

KUALA LUMPUR, Fri. - Suqiu, in a joint announcement with Umno Youth, today "put aside" seven of its 83-point election appeals in view of "the prevailing ethnic tension."

Both parties agreed that the action was also "in view of the special rights, position, privileges of the Malays and the natives of any of the State of Sabah and Sarawak as enshrined in Article 153 and other such relevant Articles of the Federal Constitution not be questioned."

Both also "expressed regret over the unintended reaction within the Malay and Chinese communities which have arisen from the Seven Points and subsequent incidents." (See page 3 for full statement).

Umno Youth chief Datuk Hishammuddin Hussein and Suqiu (the Malaysian Chinese Organisations' Election Appeals Committee) chairman Quek Suan Hiang made this announcement at a joint Press conference at the KL Hilton.

Both leaders appeared cheerful after an hour's meeting.

Also present at the meeting, which was held in a cordial atmosphere, were several senior officials from both sides.

Local and foreign journalists, when told of the meeting, began gathering at the hotel two hours before the scheduled Press conference.

Both parties, however, agreed to continue discussions on the remaining 76 appeals which they described as "acceptable".

Reading from a prepared three-page statement in Bahasa Malaysia, Hishammuddin, who is also Youth and Sports Minister, said both parties had agreed not to question the seven points as the special privileges enjoyed by the Bumiputera community were enshrined in the Constitution.

Quek later read a prepared statement in English.

The seven points put aside were:

- \* any affirmative action initiated by the Government should benefit and protect the weaker groups of society, regardless of their religious, social and racial background;
- \* efforts be made to abolish the differences between the Bumiputera and non-Bumiputera communities in all fields;
- \* fair and equitable distribution of agricultural land to farmers without racial distinction;
- \* to abolish the race-based quota system and to replace it with one that is based on merit;
- \* to do away with the quota system for entry into universities;
- \* fair treatment be accorded to all religious organisations in terms of development of religion. Government assistance should also be extended to all such organisations which include sufficient coverage from the official media; and
- \* to establish a loan scheme or financial assistance for needy students regardless of race.

Suqiu had, before the 1999 general election, submitted a 17-point memorandum containing 83 appeals, to the Government.

The appeals drew severe criticism and protests from various groups led by Umno Youth, the 4B Youth movement and later the Federation of Peninsular Malay Students. They felt that the memorandum was "challenging Malay rights."

The Suqiu committee comprises 11 Chinese associations. Among them are United Chinese School Committees Association of Malaysia (Dong Zong), United Chinese School Teachers Association of Malaysia (Jiao Zong) and

Nanyang University Alumni Association of Malaysia.

Quek said Suqiu had never questioned or challenged the special position of the Malays and the natives of Sabah and Sarawak and was fully committed to the creation of a united Bangsa Malaysia characterised by tolerance, moderation and pluralism.

He said both Umno Youth and the committee had decided to discuss the matter following the advice from Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi that all groups cease to make statements on the appeals.

Hishammuddin and Quek said Umno Youth and Suqiu were committed towards strengthening peace and harmony prevalent in Malaysia's multi-racial, multi-religious and multi-cultural society.

It is learnt that Hishammuddin had appointed a four-man team to conduct discussions with the Suqiu committee last month.

They are Supreme Council member and Bukit Bintang Umno Youth chief Datuk Azim Zabidi, special officer to the Deputy Prime Minister, Khairi Jamaluddin, special officer to Hishammuddin, Zaki Zahid and Munir Aziz, Umno Youth's information bureau member.

The Suqiu committee was represented by Quek, vice-chairman Chew Saw Eng, Ong Chiow Chuen, Tan Choong Cheng, Cheng Chee Koi, Chin Choong Sang, Yao Li Fang and Wong Chin Huat.

"The meetings were also to resolve misunderstandings that had arisen over the past few weeks," he said.

Quek told reporters later that both sides had held a series of meetings since Dec 24 to discuss the "sensitive" appeals.

"We had the meetings within a 12-day period.

"There were long discussions and plenty of hard work.

"We feel this is the best solution.

"We hope to continue working together for the betterment of the people and the nation," he said.

Refusing to field more questions from reporters, Quek said they should refer to the statement jointly issued by both parties.

Asked when both parties would resume talks on the 76 other appeals, Hishammuddin said:

"This is a sincere document that has been decided by both parties.

"It is not something that we have been taking lightly.

"I don't think there is any problem in discussing the other appeals (later)."

Hishammuddin said as far as Umno Youth was concerned, the organisation had carried out its task sincerely and responsibly.

"We will now leave the matter to the party leadership," he added.

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