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The Indian community's dilemma

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THE Indian community's dilemma A LITTLE more than half a century after its inception, the MIC appears to be at the crossroads.

Its achievements are being critically examined by the Indian community which has taken a few hard knocks politically and otherwise recently.

The halcyon days may be over for the party which has nursed and nurtured Indians to varying degrees of success since the 1940s.

After a fairly good run as the only party exclusively representing Indians in Government, the MIC is being besieged by an unexpected slew of problems.

To be sure, the MIC has many feathers in its cap for a job well done over the years when the dynamics within the community were far simpler with ready and easy solutions in sight for its woes.

But with time, problems faced by the party have become far more complex with answers not as forthcoming.

Judging by the look of things within the community, the third most senior Barisan Nasional component and founding partner of its forerunner, the Alliance, has its work cut out.

From any perspective, the outlook does not seem very bright politically, economically or socially at this point for the community, one of the smaller ethnic groups in Malaysia.

At a mere eight per cent of the population, Indians as a community are an enigma. It is difficult to state their exact position in society.

They have done exceedingly well in some sectors but languish in others.

For example, slightly more than 30 per cent of all medical practitioners are Indians, the ratio dipping a shade below in the legal profession. For generations, Indians have also been synonymous with teaching.

They are also a force to reckon with in sports where they have made their mark with distinction despite their smaller numbers.

Many trade unionists hail from the community, the movement in the country having virtually been founded by Indians. This is hardly surprising as Indians have always predominated the working class, often to their detriment.

The figures, however, are not as pleasant when it comes to certain other aspects of life.

Gangsterism within the community is at an all-time high. The crime rate among Indians is grossly disproportionate to their numbers with nearly 50 per cent of all gangster activity nationwide attributed to Indians.

To its credit, the MIC has started a programme to fight this menace by holding seminars and workshops for Indian youth in the hope that this will keep them on the right path.

Its Yayasan Strategik Social, the party's social arm, is looking at a RM2.7 million allocation annually this year and the next to spearhead the programme.

Overall, the party has asked for RM20 million from the Government over a five-year period to carry out a comprehensive programme in this respect.

Education is an equally pressing issue. Questions, within and outside the community, are being asked on whether Tamil schools are a boon or bane for Indians.

An equally vexing issue is the possibility of a reduced quota for non-Bumiputeras in universities in future. This is cause for concern, given the fact that chances among Indians for tertiary education could further

diminish, given their already small numbers.

Indian graduates are finding it increasingly difficult to find proper employment with some being jobless for months after graduation.

The issue of Tamil schools is close to Samy Vellu's heart. He has consistently maintained that they are the lifeblood of the community, pointing to the fact that new Tamil schools are no different facility-wise from national-type schools.

Some are wired with up-to-date amenities to boot, says the Works Minister.

He has also insisted that the quota for non-Bumiputeras remain. The party youth wing at its annual assembly last week also discussed the need for Indian applicants to universities to be allocated courses that could land jobs later.

Its leader Datuk Nelson Renganathan complained that some top Indian students were non-starters in the job market because of the obscure courses they studied.

On its own, the party has set up several educational institutions to spur achievements among Indian youth. Notable among them are the Tafe College in Seremban which is in operation and the Asia Institute of Medicine, Science and Technology in Semeling, Kedah, which will take off the ground soon.

Fears are also being expressed over the possible marginalisation of Indians in both the economic and social sectors.

Indians own only 1.5 per cent of all equity in the country representing RM9 billion, 44 years after independence.

While the other communities have made major strides in this respect, the Indians have obviously lagged behind.

Under the Outline Perspective Plan which provides guidelines for economic and social development over the next 10 years, Indians are projected to double equity ownership to three per cent by 2010.

But will Indians be able to find sources of loans for these shares?

In an immediate reaction to this, the MIC has asked Perbadanan Nasional Berhad to set up a special unit to help the community increase its share of national wealth.

Samy Vellu has indicated that the party will be helping nearly 10,000 Indian businessmen, especially mini-market owners, metal traders, restaurant owners and other entrepreneurs, buy most of the shares made available to them.

The party will also keep track of developments affecting Indians under the Eighth and Ninth Malaysia Plans through a special body to be set up.

Sceptics say the whole issue of doubling equity ownership in nine years may be only a pipe dream, pointing to the fact that the community took many decades to reach its current status.

A common complaint among Indian youth is the lack of business opportunities which are often few and far between. The current economic downturn is not doing the community any good either.

The party's reaction to this problem has been to ask the Amanah Ikhtiar Malaysia to extend loans of up to RM20,000 to at least 1,000 people interested in setting up small businesses.

Many Indians are urban squatters with generations perpetuating the family legacy of poverty.

The Taman Medan issue was proof of how members of a depressed segment of the community reacted under extreme pressure. The outcome of that particularly unfortunate episode is now a part of history.

Some are worried that there may be other similar episodes nationwide waiting to explode. Only time will tell if the pre-emptive measures being considered will work in the long run to prevent a violent outpour of

emotions.

Samy Vellu says the Government is positive toward suggestions that low-cost flats be built in situ for squatters. A start is being made in Taman Medan where a relocation exercise is being carried out as part of social restructuring.

The issue of monthly wages for estate folks where the community is over-represented at 50 per cent is another thorn in the side of the community.

Despite substantial rural-urban migration, 30 to 40 per cent of Indians still live in the estates eking out a living, with promises of monthly wages remaining just that.

About 50 per cent of the estate workforce is still Indian whose chances at upward mobility is at best remote.

No thanks to migration patterns, sometimes due to fragmentation of estates, Indians are increasingly finding themselves on the political periphery.

After years of being a vote bank for the Alliance and Barisan Nasional, purely on the strength of their numbers in rural areas, the community is losing its importance.

Dilution of Indian concentration in estates is costing the community dearly with Indian voters no longer the deciders in close contests.

An election loss for the MIC would have been unthinkable a decade ago. Yet, the MIC lost in the Lunas by-election last year.

In any discussion on the state of affairs within the community, most eventually arrive at the question of whether the party and Samy Vellu have done enough for the community.

Have the MIC and Samy Vellu been judged fairly in this respect?

All things being equal, would the community have developed, as it has to date, without the MIC or Samy Vellu? Have the two made a discernible difference in the destiny of local Indians?

Some argue that progress being a constant, the community would have continued improving itself, regardless of which party represented them or who was in the saddle.

Others attribute the current state of the community to Samy Vellu's singular effort to improve its lot.

His gutsy approach to problems within the community has earned the respect of many, even those in the opposition.

Few will contest the fact that the colourful leader, known for his emotional outbursts when it comes to Indian issues, is a go-getter.

He is always ready to literally go to war with any quarter to protect his "flock" and their interests.

It is said that he is not shy about raising matters relating to Indians at the weekly Cabinet meeting presided over by Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Weekly representation to the Government is a strong point which Samy Vellu touts whenever necessary to prove the MIC's worth to the community.

This is really the MIC's strong suit, an indication of the fact that the MIC has the Prime Minister's ear.

Samy Vellu's failure is probably the fact that he has never quite relegated real authority to subordinates, preferring to be a hands-on leader.

This has led to his larger-than-life image, making him a bigger target for detractors. But then that is the reality of political life.

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