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Addressing status of minority Bumis in Sabah, Sarawak

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SARAWAK and Sabah, after gaining independence together with Singapore and the Federation of Malaya to form Malaysia on Sept 16, 1963, have many negative things in common.

One is the status of the Bumiputera, particularly the minority groups who are still far behind in economic, educational and social development.

In the rural areas, many are living in poverty even though both of the States' first chief ministers represented the natives - Iban leader Tan Sri Stephan Kalong Ningkan for Sarawak and Kadazandusun leader Tun Mohd Fuad Stephens (Donald Stephens) for Sabah.

The natives have also produced other leaders like Datuk Seri Tawi Sli in Sarawak, Datuk Seri Joseph Pairin Kitingan and Tan Sri Bernard Giluk Dompok in Sabah but sadly, poverty is still prevalent.

Former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad last month told Parliament that a special household survey was being undertaken to determine the state of poverty and quality of life of Bumiputera minority groups in Sarawak and Sabah.

Initial findings indicated that poverty was highest among the Penan, Kenyah and Kajang in Sarawak and the Rungus, Suluk and Orang Sungai in Sabah.

Pairin, who is Keningau MP, had on Nov 4 called on the Government to pay greater attention to eradicating poverty among native groups in the two States.

He proposed that a Native Affairs Department be set up to look after their interest, similar to the Orang Asli Department which is in charge of the Orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia.

The former Sabah Chief Minister has gained support from Sarawak leaders who expressed confidence that the Federal Government under Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi would continue to look after the Bumiputera minorities.

Dayak leader Paul Kadang, in supporting Pairin, proposed that a Bumiputera Minorities Affairs Ministry be established in the Prime Minister's Department.

It should be tasked with monitoring policies and the socio-economic progress of minority groups. This is to ensure they receive the required assistance.

Kadang, who is Parti Bansa Dayak Sarawak information chief and the party's socio-economic bureau chairman, welcomes the Federal Government's move to conduct the survey.

The party believed that the survey would provide updates on the socio-economic standing of the groups and how much they had progressed since Sarawak became part of Malaysia.

Several studies had been conducted on the socio-economic status of the Dayak communities, including on the level of poverty.

One of the studies showed that although the poverty rate had been reduced, the State was less successful in redressing the problem among the minority groups.

Study after study could be conducted but none will bring any benefit if the findings are either not implemented nor carried out fully. Lack of co-operation from the target groups could also prove a barrier.

A political will is needed to push up the living standard of the

minority groups.

Like the Kadazandusun in Sabah, the Dayaks depend on their leaders to help them progress.

While it is said that the lack of progress among the Kadazandusuns can be attributed to disunity, it is not much different with the Dayaks.

The two groups have too many political parties representing them in the Government. Sometimes, one can see their political leaders bickering for posts instead of working for the people.

The Kadazandusuns in Sabah are represented by four parties.

The Dayaks, meanwhile, also have four with another one awaiting registration.

They are the Sarawak National Party established on April 10, 1961; Parti Bansa Dayak Sarawak (Sept 9, 1983), Sarawak State Reform Party (Oct 9, 1996), Sarawak Progressive Democratic Party (Nov 8, 2002); and Parti Rakyat Sarawak (awaiting registration).

The Muslim Bumiputera have only one party in Sarawak, the Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Sarawak (PBB), registered on April 30, 1973. In PBB, the Dayaks are also represented as the party is a merger of Iban-based Parti Pesaka and Malay-based Parti Bumiputera.

Though long overdue, it is still not too late for the Dayaks and their leaders, irrespective of their political inclination, to be united and to work together.

Until this is achieved, it will be quite difficult for the community to shrug off the "living below poverty line" tag always associated with it.