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NGOs and the polls game

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MOST politicians in the ruling coalition, when discussing NGO leaders and activists, have only condescending remarks. When it comes to politicians from the Opposition, the general perception is that they seem to be working hand in hand with the NGOs.

Before taking the matter further, it is essential to make a distinction, not necessarily clear-cut, that NGOs can be categorised as either being pro-Government or pro-Opposition. There is actually another category, the ones truly committed to their cause who will work with any political party, opposing none.

But such groups do not figure much in this discussion.

The evolution of NGOs in Malaysia has somehow led to the pro-Government ones being perceived as less "NGO-ish", meaning not being referred to as the NGOs that have become the topic of discussion, prone to controversy.

Generally too, in the context of Malaysians politics, the term NGO is used to refer to organisations that are vocal and critical of government policies and perceived, rightly or wrongly, to be working with the Opposition.

To be fair, some of the NGOs which oppose or support certain policies of the Government allow themselves, consciously or otherwise, to be used by political parties to undermine their opponents.

Against this backdrop, Election Commission chairman Datuk Wira Abdul Rashid Abdul Rahman was quoted in Utusan Malaysia as saying NGOs can contest in the general election under their banner.

To be eligible, the NGOs must be registered under the Societies Act and register with the EC.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, responding to the statement, said NGOs should not contest under the banner of their organisation but their members could do so individually.

He further added that they should contest under their banner only if they registered as political parties.

His deputy Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi echoed the sentiment.

To this, Kemaman Umno deputy chief Ahmad Shabery Chik said there was a historical reason why NGOs need to be clear on where they stand - either as a "friendly society" or as a political party.

"This provision in the Societies Act came about in 1980 when King Ghaz (Tan Sri Ghazali Shafie) was the Home Minister.

"It was at a time when student bodies and Abim (the Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement) were really partisan in politics."

Ghazali went to Parliament to table the Bill, saying: "Let's call a spade a spade."

"King Ghaz then wanted the NGOs to be identified and make clear what they wanted to be, a friendly society or a political party."

Since then, he added, it has been quite clear that only registered political parties or independent candidates can contest an election.

Abim president Ahmad Azam Abdul Rahman said Dr Mahathir was right in saying NGOs must register as a political party if they wanted to contest under their banner.

"Otherwise, the convention by which NGOs and political parties are separated in their functions and roles will be messed up.

"Furthermore, the reason for existence of the NGOs will be negated if they start becoming political participants."

Ahmad Azam did not deny that Abim, like many other NGOs, was partisan in its support for certain political parties and politicians.

"But I believe this is the right of NGOs to choose which party we believe in. We believe that we have the independence to be partisan."

Ahmad Azam said Abim had been accused of being a political lallang, swaying from side to side.

"We do not think that we are lallang. It proves that we support any party that we believe is fighting a cause consistent with our struggle.

"We take pride that by tradition, we have not allowed any of our leaders to hold on to their post once they contest in elections."

(Datuk Seri) Anwar Ibrahim, Mohd Nor Manuty and other leaders had to vacate their posts in Abim when they contested elections, regardless of the (political party's) banner under which they were contesting.

Umno supreme council member Datuk Ahmad Zahid Hamidi believes that partisan NGOs should just join the political fray instead of hiding behind the NGOs banner.

"If they have the courage, just get into the political arena and contest.

"Don't stay outside, play politics and try to be the force to determine the political direction of the nation.

"To me, NGOs should focus on what they set up their organisations for and the cause for which they claim to be struggling.

"Instead, we see many NGOs today being run more like political parties, more so even than political parties. Their leaders are more like politicians than members of political parties.

"So why don't they just enter the fray and see who can emerge as the choice of the voters?"

Such feelings are by no means uncommon. Other politicians have complained that some NGOs seem to be more interested in politics than the job they were set up to do.

Ahmad Shabery does not believe NGOs should be allowed to become political parties.

"Malaysia is burdened with too many political parties. While other developed nations are pursuing two- or three-party systems, we are besieged with numerous political parties.

"If the NGOs are turned into political parties, we will be in the worst sort of mess.

"Our present system is doing quite well. NGOs that want to make a strong stand about their agenda should turn to the political party of their choice and that is how it works."

But it was also pointed out by an observer that as much as some NGOs had leaders and members who were partisan, there were politicians who contested top NGO posts.

"They are looking at the NGOs as good platforms to further their political ambitions. With that, NGOs become extensions of the parties to which these politicians belong."

Ahmad Azam said this was why Abim was adamant that its leaders not belong to any political party, especially if they had become elected representatives.

"As it is, especially among the Malays, there is too much politics. If we start turning Malay or Islamic-based NGOs into political parties, there will be no end to politicking and the real agenda for the religion and community will take a backseat."

Another observer said, "They (NGO leaders) take sides during general elections. Some even share a platform with politicians.

"If the election is closely contested, NGOs supporting one political party will be the enemy of the other.

"What can the NGOs expect after the election is over? If the party they support loses, do they expect the victorious party to be friendly?"

That seems to be the order of Malaysian politics.

After every general election or even by-election, political players spend time identifying and criticising NGOs that support particular political parties.

Less benign politicians may harbour a grudge against NGOs that opposed them, sometimes going deeper even than their political opponents.

When that happens co-operation between the two becomes difficult, negating the purpose for which the NGOs came into being.

On that score at least, Ahmad Zahid's statement that NGOs publicly enter the political fray does not sound so petty, though it may complicate the existing political equation.

In short, if NGOs do participate in elections, they will not have to work with political parties with which they do not agree.

As in previous elections, most of the NGOs that threw their weight behind political parties do not subscribe to their ideologies. But they did it on the ground of better-the-political-devil-they-know.

At the same time, most political parties are aware NGOs, given their small scope of causes, will never pose a threat to their existence.

But if they do register as political parties and contest the general election, it will add colour to the event. After all, each NGO represents a different cause - from environment, consumerism, workers to animal protection.

Their banners can carry symbols of trees, weighing machines, hammers and sickles. But one does wonder which animal will be chosen by those fighting for animal protection.