

Idris Jala: Pemandu not bothered by racial rhetoric

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INTERVIEW When the New Economic Model was first unveiled back in March 2010, possibly the loudest debate was centred around its affirmative action policies.

Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak (left) had called to do away with race-based affirmative action and to replace it with a needs-based one instead, undoing 40 years of the New Economic Policy (NEM).

Almost immediately, Malay NGOs leapt into action, hurling criticisms and potshots at the NEM, with the second part of the model even being labelled as 'watered down'. One of the architects of NEM from the National Economic Action Council even claims that the document was 'hijacked' by Malay rights pressure group Perkasa.

Needless to say, all eyes were on the Performance Management and Delivery Unit (Pemandu), with its Chief Executive Officer and Minister in Prime Minister's department Idris Jala bearing the brunt of the criticisms.

Some said that the needs-based affirmative action would neglect the Malays while some said it was downright 'unconstitutional' because it would go against the article 153 which preserves the special position of the Malays.

On the other end of the spectrum, oppositionists have reserved their scepticism over the model, raising questions over the Najib administration's sincerity in following through with it.

After all, the Equal Opportunities Commission was dropped from the later parts of the New Economic Model although it is uncertain if it was due to 'political pressure'.

While the effects may not be immediately felt, Idris said that race-based affirmative action is already slowly being done away with.

In a recent exclusive interview with Malaysiakini, the former corporate figure who had helmed Malaysia Airlines and Shell Malaysia, said that current government policies are becoming merit-based.

'GTP does not care about race'

Citing the policies under the Government Transformation Programme, called the National Key Result Areas, he said that none of them have anything to do with the race of the recipient.

"None of our programmes use race. If they are poor, they will get help. We don't look at their skin colour. Like our pre-school programme, they're definitely not race-based," continued Idris (right).

Armed with Powerpoint slides in his office in Putrajaya, he said that 54,569 children from hardcore poor families have been enrolled into pre-school classes while two million people in the rural poor category have been connected with newly-built roads.

"Like the announcement that anyone who gets 8A+ will get a Public Service Department scholarship.

"If we keep on debating it on the high level, it will never see implementation. We did it and it came out very good," he said.

(Incidentally on the same day as the interview, deputy education minister Wee Ka Siong lamented over civil servants who ignored Cabinet directives in giving out PSD scholarships to top scorers).

More action, less talk

But being the only cabinet minister who is not a political party member, Idris probably has more reason than anyone else in not wanting to dwell on occasional racial rhetoric hurled against him and his team in Pemandu.

In fact, avoiding racial debate and polemics has become somewhat of a deliberate strategy for him in an effort to be non-partisan.

"The issue is not to get bogged down by the debate. Like the prime minister, he just gets on and does it...

"It is just better to do it, rather than just talk about it. Instead of talk, talk, talk, we just want to do, do, do.

"If we just keep on discussing this at policy level, there will just be a lot of agro (slang for 'aggression')," he said.

"When we help the poor, we help all the hardcore poor. Who can argue with us and say that we didn't help a particular family because they are Chinese or Indian or Dayak?"

"We are action-biased rather than talk-biased," he said.

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