

## **Felda: Another chance for the Malays?**

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**Zaid Ibrahim**

COMMENT It's an election year and therefore not the time to say or do anything controversial.

This, however, is apparently not applicable to Felda chairperson Isa Samad and Umno information chief Ahmad Maslan, the party stalwarts who are trying to list Felda through the subsidiary Felda Global Ventures Holdings Sdn Bhd.

It has been confirmed that they will go ahead with the listing, regardless of the true wishes of Felda settlers and their cooperative, Koperasi Permodalan Felda.

Isa (left) and company think they are being clever by forming a special purpose vehicle to replace KPF.

Their action only confirms what everyone else already knows: that Felda is no longer an authority that was established to take care of the settlers or their cooperative, but an Umno plantation conglomerate.

What Isa is effectively saying is, "Who are these people in KPF and the settlers to stop Umno from listing its plantation vehicle?"

I'm sorry but Felda is not an Umno vehicle, but nominally a government vehicle for some party leaders.

### **Mahathir rationale for listing**

Former prime minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad, as always, is their prime spokesperson. His rationale is that these settlers do not have the cash to develop the plantations, which means the future would be bleak indeed without the listing.

It's true that these settlers don't have the financial resources, but why should they bother to expand the business when it's not even theirs in the first place?

Since 1990, all the land that state governments gave to Felda did not end up belonging to the settlers as the original plan had intended, since the settlement programme for the poor had stopped by then.

For example, over 300,000 acres of Felda land in Sabah are not with the settlers but with the state government.

Today Felda controls about two million acres, but it is being managed by Umno.

They realise that with the listing, they can "cash out" Felda's assets and thereby squeeze more juice out of it.

If there is no listing and the Barisan Nasional loses the general election, all that wealth passes into the hands of the new government. Why risk that?

These Umno leaders tell Felda settlers that they should approve and support this listing because they will get "a windfall" and also regular dividend of say, 14 percent on average.

### **Working towards self-destruction**

To these Malays I say this: you are worth more than that. These leaders have used your good name. They never meant to bring more poor Malays into the scheme or share these lands with you. They just wanted the land for their own business purposes.

This is more than just fraud on a grand scale - it is a betrayal of the principles on which Felda was created in the first place.

Former prime minister the late Abdul Razak Hussein set up Felda for a specific and noble purpose, which was to give land to the landless.

He wanted to give the poor and unemployed the opportunity to make something of themselves, to provide for their families and to earn their self-respect by working the land provided them.

What is happening now makes a mockery of that dream. Felda is now a plantation conglomerate, a business entity that exploits goodwill to get state land and government financial assistance.

It is no longer the Felda that Razak (right) had first conceived of, just as Umno is no longer the party that the Tunku conceived of in 1951. In taking Felda away from the settlers, the party has destroyed itself and the Malays will punish them.

To the settlers, I ask them to wait and see if Pakatan Rakyat have an alternative scheme.

Would Pakatan be better able to provide for you and your family? Would they, for example, be able to promise that all your debts with Felda would be written off?

Also, what would Pakatan do with Felda's current landholdings, which have not yet been given to the poor?

In other words, how will Pakatan share Felda's wealth with your children? And what can they offer over and above what you are entitled to as members of the cooperative?

The upcoming general election is a defining moment for the Malays, particularly the settlers. It's an opportunity to use the ballot box to turn the tables on Umno, which is fair considering the fact that Umno has taken the Malays for a ride for so long. All I ask is that you don't listen to Isa Samad this time - listen to your heart.

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