

Dr Jeyakumar's solitary political journey
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'In the realm of ideas everything depends on enthusiasm... in the real world all rests on perseverance.'

- Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

I approach politics and politicians with great skepticism. In Malaysia, where race and politics are intimately entwined, one quickly learns that race-blind altruism is a commodity in short supply.

Dr Michael Jeyakumar is an anomaly among politicians. He is a recently elected member of parliament who subscribes to an antiquated leftist ideology (at least here in Malaysia), and is routinely demonised by the religious right and scorned by the hardcore capitalists who dominate the mainstream discourse..

Yet, he is someone who has earned the respect of grassroots-level participants from both sides of the political divide.

The real work of serving the people happens far from the corridors of Putrajaya and in Sungai Siput where Jeyakumar in 2008 prevailed over the bellicose S Samy Vellu, president of the MIC.

This country doctor and his team of four full-time staff and eight volunteers work in relative obscurity, attempting to forge a new political and social paradigm, one with roots both in grassroots-level activism and macro-level political and social change.

In this interview, which covers a wide range of topics, Jeyakumar provides insight into what it means to stand apart from the political mainstream but still engage with it.

Last year, Jeyakumar and other PSM (Parti Sosialis Malaysia) members were detained under the obscene charge of waging war against the Yang di-Pertuan Agong during the height of the build-up to the Bersih 2.0 rally.

This would be a natural start this interview, considering the level of harassment opposition politicians face in this country.

Malaysiakini: Could you elaborate on your experience while in detention?

Jeyakumar: It was rather unpleasant. The powerlessness. Being held in solitary confinement. Being denied all reading material. They even refused to give me a Bible. I was very anxious that our detention was just the prelude to a wider political crackdown and perhaps the banning of the PSM.

As the interrogation proceeded, I came to feel that the police were not looking for the truth, but for bits of information that they could then stitch together as a plausible communist-conspiracy story.

It would have been relatively easy for them to release us after the Bersih event or to allow our first habeas corpus application to be upheld. But when they passed over these two opportunities of releasing us without looking like they were flip-flopping, I knew I was looking at a possible two-year stint.

That is when I decided to go on the hunger strike. But I had to wait till the family visit so that I could let the outside world know before I started. That was a frustrating 10-day wait as we had no family visits.

What was the level of PSM's involvement during the Perak state government crisis and has the current state government been of any assistance in your work in Sungai Siput?

We enjoyed reasonable access to the Perak state government under YB Nizar (Jamaluddin). It was easy for us to arrange meetings between marginalised sectors and the state exco then.

The current state government is of no assistance. The YDP (Yang Dipertua) for Sungai Siput has not given me an appointment to meet despite being asked three times over the past 18 months. Ditto the land officer.

I and all other opposition MPs and Adun (state assemblypersons) are never invited to the Majlis Tindakan Daerah (District Action Committee) meetings that are held monthly ever since the Nizar administration collapsed.

Communities facing problems who go to the MB's office are told that they will only get help if they cut ties with me and the PSM.

And what have been the responses of those communities who have been told to cut ties from you and the PSM? Do you find support lagging for your work there?

It depends. Some communities have scolded the BN types who admonished them. Sometimes their overt support for us decreases for a bit, but if their main grievances are not handled by the BN, then it's a matter of time before they come back to us for assistance.

So, in this game, timing is crucial. Sometimes we have to give them room to explore the options offered by the other side, and not try to hold them back by threats or "emotional blackmail". But we must maintain contact so that we know when there is a need to mobilise them to protest some blatantly unfair decision of the government.

The Orang Asli are on the whole more timid (generally the poorer the community, the more beholden it is to the BN) and it has been very difficult to do work with them since the collapse of the PR (Pakatan Rakyat) in Perak - despite the bridge in Perje.

But on the whole, support for PSM's work has steadily increased since March 2008 among the Malays, Chinese and Indians, for they can see close up how the PSM works.

In many parts of the country, rejection of BN misrule is what fuels support for the opposition. In Sungai Siput, in addition to this, our work on the ground is a plus point for us.

Could you describe your working relationship with Pakatan and the kind of assistance you get from them, if any?

Working relations are cordial. I think the PR parties at Sungai Siput and Perak levels recognise and are impressed with the kind of work we are doing.

PAS played a big role in the bridge that we built for Kg Perje, the Orang Asli kampung.

Most people would be unfamiliar with the Kg Perje Bridge and the Orang Asli kampung. Could you elaborate on this project and how exactly PSM and PAS worked together?

Kg Perje is an Orang Asli kampung located about 40km from Sungai Siput town. About 20km of that distance is along a logging trail.

The 40 families there wanted to repair the existing hanging bridge. My team felt that this would be difficult and proposed that we build a new bridge. At the time of decision, we didn't realise how difficult that would be.

The project to build the 150-foot long bridge, mounted on four 24-foot high beams, took 18 months and close to RM80,000 to complete. We had to go in about 20 times to do the work, gotong-royong style.

A PAS leader, who is an engineer, helped us design the bridge and visited the site several times, and supervised the technically difficult step of raising the cables.

Several PAS members came in with us on several occasions for the gotong-royong. A PAS member loaned us his cement mixer for a nine-month period. Perak PAS also contributed RM5,000 for the project.

It really was a case of biting off more than you should have. But the party members and friends rallied around and completed a project that was far too exacting, given our meagre resources.

But getting it done boosted the morale of the PSM members in Sungai Siput, and provided a very concrete example, showcasing our commitment to help the Orang Asli. We also won the admiration and support of the component members of the Pakatan Rakyat.

Do religious or cultural sensitivities hinder the work you do?

Not too much. All religions have a "socialist" core. Politics does hinder though. Sometimes people are afraid to come and participate as they are afraid that they will be spotted by the BN and then denied the bits of aid that they are getting.

How does the PSM manage to balance the expectations of the diverse communities you represent?

It is not a zero-sum game where we have to deprive one to cater to the needs of the other. The fight of the small vegetable farmers for their rights to hold on to their land does not impinge negatively on the fight of poor Malay farmers being cheated by an Umno-linked company, or on the struggle for urban pioneers to get grants for the plots they have built their houses on.

In fact, our strategy is to try and get them to come together to support one another's demands.

What is the communication process like?

We try to get the different communities together for discussion sessions. This can be difficult because though everyone speaks Malay, the level of proficiency is sometimes not good enough to have a deeper discussion.

The PSM is essentially a grassroots-level political movement. How exactly does it enable the kind of dramatic headline-grabbing changes when lack of resources and manpower means it's best suited for small communities?

I believe that we shouldn't be overly concerned with dramatic headlines and media "spin". The real work that we do will speak eloquently enough, especially with the emergence of the alternative media.

And because our class-based, community-centred, civil disobedience approach is now quite unique in the present Malaysian political context, headline "grabbing" moments will develop from time to time.

Being overly focused on spinning the media belies a certain dismissive and even manipulative stance vis-a-vis the rakyat. However, in the past one year, we have got more than our share of "dramatic headlines" though it was more due to the miscalculation of the police than to the success of our own plans.

But dramatic headlines draw attention to social/political causes, like the Bersih movement and Hindraf, for example.

Yes, dramatic headlines do help spread one's cause. And I think that we have had our share in the past four years since March 2008.

jerit parliament ride for change final leg 181208 d jeyakumar1. December 2008 - The bicycle campaign, especially when the CPO (chief police officer) of Selangor arrested the entire northern team in Rawang.

2. Our annual asset declaration ritual.

3. The case I filed against the Prime Minister's Department for the withholding of constituency funds to the opposition MPs.

4. The EO (Emergency Orders) detention took the cake, but we never imagined that that might happen.

But there must be a baseline of serious work on grassroots and national issues. Only then does the party come out looking good, with the spotlight on us. Otherwise, people will view the headline grabbing efforts as cheap and desperate stunts.

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