

Where PSM differs with Hindraf
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This is the final of a two-part interview with Sungai Siput MP Dr Michael Jeyakumar. The PSM leader provides insight into what it means to stand apart from the political mainstream but still engage with it.

Malaysiakini: How does a political party like the PSM move beyond its grassroots level, especially since the alternative media is not accessible to most people?

Jeyakumar: One, we take up issues that affect a larger number of people for example the healthcare system, the oversupply of nursing graduates, the GST (Goods and Services Tax), the contractualisation of labour, etc.

Initially we were confined in communities facing dire straits, for example eviction, but now we have broadened our reach.

Two, we prepare simple pamphlets on all these issues in three languages and distribute these in 'pasar malams', coffee shops and numerous other places.

Three, we do get coverage in the mainstream media when we do things like holding a demo in front of some ministry, or file a case suing the PM's Department, or even holding a press conference.

Though the editors have their constraints, many of the reporters on the ground respect the PSM for its principled stances and the fact that there is often substance in what we say.

And I think that we have definitely moved beyond our grassroots bases. We have captured the attention of the Malaysian public, to a degree. And we come out with a whole lot of press statements, pamphlets and small booklets, e.g. my speeches in Parliament. Our analysis is spreading wider than it was four years ago.

Could you cite a situation when the PSM didn't want to compromise its principles even though by doing so, the party would move beyond its grassroots level?

We didn't get on to the Hindraf bandwagon though several politicians from the PR (Pakatan Rakyat) parties did. In late 2007, we were one of the few voices in the opposition that criticised the ideological basis of Hindraf while speaking out against their victimisation by the government.

It is relatively easy to mobilise people using emotive racial arguments, but we feel that will ultimately make it difficult to build the coalition of the "99 percent" that we need to build to restructure our economy and society.

How exactly did the Hindraf wave affect Sungai Siput?

It made some of the voters very angry with (former MIC chief) Samy Vellu who was perceived as being dismissive of the Hindraf movement. It also neutralised his secret weapon.

samy vellu mic agm 110710 04Samy Vellu (left) had managed to get some 3,000 to 5,000 Indians from outside Sungai Siput to register as voters in Sungai Siput.

These voters would be bused in on polling day and given money after voting. They gave Samy Vellu a head start in every election.

However, more than 50 percent of them got pissed off with him over his mishandling of Hindraf and so they came and voted for me.

What are your impressions of Hindraf now?

The same as it was in 2007 when the movement peaked. I understand the concern and anger that many Indians feel regarding the marginalisation of Indians by BN policy.

I respect the courage and sacrifices of the Hindraf activists. I recognise and acknowledge the role Hindraf played in helping creating the March 2008 tsunami.

But Hindraf as a movement is based on an analysis that is past its "use-by" date. It is premised on an ethnic analysis of society, and there isn't much ideologically speaking to differentiate it from either MIC or Perkasa.

The PSM has always argued that the marginalised among the Indian community need to form a coalition with the marginalised of other racial groups, including the Malays, to challenge a socio-economic system that is skewed towards the super-rich.

This is diametrically opposed to the Hindraf strategy of uniting all Indians to challenge perceived Malay hegemony. The PSM has from the beginning stated this position clearly and openly.

With regards to your comments on Hindraf, do you think that component parties of Pakatan are split along ethnic lines even though they claim to represent all Malaysians?

It is not a contradiction. You can espouse a "Malaysian" outlook despite having a predominance of a particular racial group in your party.

It is your analysis of the political and socio-economic system that is important. If you adopt an analysis that is not a race-based, you will be speaking for all oppressed Malaysians even if your membership is more of a particular race. That's one of the differences between the PR parties and the BN parties.

Do you find the lack of backing of large vocal political parties a help or hindrance when it comes to voicing the concerns of your constituents?

d jeyakumar meet the people 2We find that the larger parties often are focusing on personality issues of one leader or the other, while the PSM strives to highlight issues affecting the grassroots.

It is the mobilisation of the rakyat that highlights issues that we want to bring up. Once the rakyat get involved, the other parties usually will come to show their support.

This is an interesting point. Do you view the PSM's role as a catalyst to get other political parties involved in the process and could you give an example of an issue that PSM brought to the public attention and how other political parties followed?

Yes, a catalyst and a pressure group. For example, we have always been strongly against the setting up of private clinics in government hospitals.

When I found out from an answer to a question in Parliament that the government was thinking of extending the private clinic initiative to another four hospitals (in addition to Selayang and Putrajaya), the PSM organised simultaneous pickets in all four hospitals.

The PR parties which hadn't been so concerned by the issue all came out in support of our position when they saw that the general public reacted favourably to our stance.

Our annual asset declaration is another example. Now the Penang state government has started the

same. We have been on the forefront of the anti-FTA (Free Trade Agreement) movement and the anti-GST group.

Recently we started an expose of the overtraining of nurses by the private colleges, which are driven by the greed for the PTPTN (private higher education) loans.

We have also presented a list of 'Peoples' Expectations' to the Pakatan Rakyat leadership in Perak that we want them to implement if they come to power in PRU13 (13th general elections).

What is the difference between your 'Peoples; Expectation' list and the Pakatan manifesto?

I think we, the PSM, are more grounded in the reality that ordinary Malaysians live in. So we have more specific programmes and suggestions. However, there is a fair degree of overlap between the two documents.

Malaysian politics is personality driven and you have achieved an almost cult-like status. Is there a process within the PSM to groom a new generation of leaders?

Yes, there is. We are constantly pushing/encouraging newer and younger members to take up more responsibility. Meeting and discussions are given importance within the PSM. We believe our active members must understand why we take certain decisions.

We need to enhance the capacity of our members if we wish to expand our influence. I believe that we have to give younger members room to experiment and grow. The PSM must have an enabling environment for younger leaders to develop.

Could you give us an example of where there was disagreement between (younger) members on the decisions the PSM made?

Example 1, the younger people are generally more gung-ho. Some of them have been pushing for PSM to stand in more seats in PRU13 (we stood candidates in four seats in PRU12).

They argue that for the amount of work we do, and the commitment and capacity of our potential candidates, we should be given more seats to contest.

But the majority accepted the argument that PRU13 is about changing the BN and that the general public would think poorly of the PSM if they saw us as the cause of three-cornered fights in several constituencies.

Public perception is all-important to any political party as only if the public views us positively can we succeed in winning them over to our position.

Example 2, in Sungai Siput we have taken a decision to do away with the garlanding of leaders in public functions. It's a feudal carry-over and is inimical to the development of true democracy.

But when I visit temples during festivals, the temple committees invariably want to garland me. The younger members get upset when I accept the garlanding as they feel we are not keeping to our principles.

However, the older members argue that it would seem disrespectful to refuse, and as we are still in the process of making friends with the temple committees, most of whom were strong MIC supporters; we should not be so inflexible.

What was your impression of the debate between the MCA and DAP?

Don't understand Mandarin. But from the body language, (MCA chief) Dr Chua Soi Lek looked more in control.

And given the opportunity, who would you like to debate and what would the topic be?

The minister of labour - Malaysia's current macro-economic policy is leading to a massive erosion of the rights of our workers. The minister of health - over the 1Care health system.

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