

## **Will Hindraf and Indians fall for BN election bait?**

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COMMENT The recent lifting of the ban on the Hindu Rights Action Force (Hindraf) has resulted in a flood of commentaries about how this and other measures undertaken by Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak and the BN government to recapture Indian support through various conciliatory measures may impact on Hindraf and the larger Indian population.

The consensus among many commentators is that the BN already has the Indian vote in the bag and that the mending of relations with Hindraf and the opening up of the national purse strings to address Indian shortfalls in education and economy - even if in a limited way - will be sufficient to bring the critical Indian vote in many federal and state constituencies back into the BN fold.

This rush to judgment is not only premature; it is most probably wrong. This is because it underestimates the sense of deprivation, injustice and anger felt by the Indian community that has arisen over four decades of BN-sanctioned institutionalised racism and discrimination.

It also fails to take into account the passion and commitment that has driven P Waythamoorthy (left) and his Hindraf colleagues who have pursued, with much personal sacrifice, the cause of equal rights and opportunities for all Malaysians, especially for Indian Malaysians.

Ever since their rally in Kuala Lumpur on Nov 25, 2007, and the 2008 general election in which they were one of the major catalysts for the political tsunami that occurred, Hindraf leaders and supporters have been victims of a BN campaign to demonise, persecute and wipe out the movement.

Surely, Hindraf will be the first to see this ban removal - politically timed on the eve of Thaipusam - for what it is: a political ploy to win Indian votes rather than a change of heart towards the movement and its stand on Indian rights.

BN's long history of double-talk

Many from the minority communities are well aware that the BN has a long history of sweet, and often, double talk. Indians especially have been victims of BN's unfulfilled promises that are made election after election ever since the country obtained its independence.

In the past 50 years of Alliance and BN rule - and despite MIC participation in the two coalitions - the Indian position in economy and society has worsened steadily by whatever indicator of socio-economic and political development is used.

Despite the paucity of official statistics, there is sufficient quantitative and qualitative evidence to show that poor Indians as well as those from middle-class backgrounds have fallen behind their non-Indian counterparts (with the exception of the Orang Asli) because of racial discrimination, bureaucratic red tape and lack of access to governmental resources.

There has been little evidence so far of fundamental changes in national policies affecting minority communities. The hard reality which Hindraf is acutely aware of is that the home minister can very well impose another ban on the movement once the elections are over and that the Treasury and other civil service doors are shut again on Indians when the movement is no longer seen as useful in Umno's effort to retain political supremacy.

The commentators who argue that Hindraf should see the election concessions to Indians as representing real change as well as those who are predicting that Hindraf will align itself with BN may well believe that it is in the best interest of Hindraf and the Indian community to accept whatever benefits or sweeteners are thrown to the Indian electorate.

They may be convinced that challenging Umno's political hegemony and the racist principles upon which this hegemony is founded is futile. Better to make hay while the sun shines and to be a small time beneficiary to the Umno big money and huge political clout juggernaut than to be a principled dissident.

In doing so, they appear to be ignorant or uninformed of Hindraf's mission, a reminder of which has been articulated in the following terms:

Hindraf has made its position very clear from the very beginning that its duties are to find permanent solutions to the 55-year-old problems plaguing the Indian community. Politicians from both divides of the politics have thus far not come up with any concrete solutions to the problems faced by the Malaysian Indian community, but have instead used problems of the poor to gain mileage and further their political ambitions.

Mere rhetoric of "Change" and throwing crumbs of millions of ringgit here and there are not permanent solutions that the lower rung community seek. Hindraf has been working with the poor who have been neglected and their voice silenced. We know their predicament better than anyone else. We will not be dictated as to what is best for them. We know what is best for them.

We wish to warn all those concerned: Anyone who comes on our way to derail our Blueprint - a 5-year palpable plan to bring the poor and marginalised communities into the mainstream national economy would have to live to regret their actions much later. We at Hindraf have nothing to lose for we are convinced that we have to take the community out of the neo-slavery condition that they live in.

We have fought many battles, and have won and lost and suffered much. There has not been a single organisation in Malaysia that has gone through what Hindraf faced. All these have made us resolute and focussed to face whatever challenges that may come our way.

Nothing can hurt us more as we have endured many challenges before.

Commentators and readers interested in learning more about the objectives of the Hindraf struggle can refer to their 18-point demand which emerged in 2007 and their more recent blueprint.

In summary, the two documents call for:

- The dismantling of the racist and discriminatory system and state;
- Addressing the plight of hundreds of thousands of displaced plantation workers and stateless Indians;
- Ensuring adequate and equal educational, employment and business opportunities for Indians and other minorities;
- Eradicating the racism that is rampant within the police and other sectors of the civil service and which has especially targeted poor Indians; and
- Raising the standards of human rights practices to ensure a free, just and fair nation.

In the countdown to the elections, we can expect more intense spinning and political manoeuvring, not only by the BN but also by the Pakatan parties to draw Hindraf into their camp.

Both coalitions are fully aware that Indian voters hold the key to power in the states of Kedah, Perak, Selangor and Negri Sembilan. Indians are also a sizable presence in Johor, Malacca and Pahang and can help influence the outcomes in these states should the state seats become closely contested.

Whatever position Hindraf decides to take in the coming general election, I am confident that it will not betray the cause of equal rights, non-discrimination and justice that Hindraf has valiantly fought for on behalf of all Malaysians.

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