

Pakatan and Hindraf - the missed opportunity

MalaysiaKini.com

April 8, 2013

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COMMENT I attended a Hindraf dinner a few weeks ago at which they explained their blueprint for GE13. After the presentation, I posed the hypothetical question which seemed a likely scenario: "What if the BN embraces your blueprint? What then?"

P Waythayamoorthy's reply was "We would rather Pakatan Rakyat accepts our blueprint after all we have gone through under BN since Independence..." or words to that effect.

Well, now the election has been called and what is the scenario? BN is at the point of embracing Hindraf's blueprint, whether in toto or in part.

What is politically bewildering is that Pakatan has rebuffed Hindraf and has not included the proposals from the blueprint in its manifesto or that challenges the institutional racism (in particular, the NEP) that has been part of BN policy since 1971.

The rationale was that Hindraf's blueprint was based on race while Pakatan's manifesto was based on need of all classes.

After Hindraf's criticism of the Pakatan manifesto, the Indian Malaysian leaders in Pakatan gave the lame excuse that they were not in the drafting committee of the manifesto. This was hardly convincing, while giving the public a poor image of the way in which policies are made within Pakatan.

Soon after that, the DAP saw fit to include several proposals from Hindraf's blueprint in its post facto 'Gelang Patah Declaration'" and after it did that, Hindraf accused the DAP of plagiarising the blueprint.

The bizarre and total inconsistency of this Gelang Patah Declaration is the fact that it was promulgated as a DAP rather than a Pakatan policy statement.

Why wasn't it a Pakatan declaration? Is the declaration only acceptable by the DAP but not PKR and PAS? Why was this not 'racist' when Pakatan had said that the Hindraf blueprint was racist? Politically, it looked ridiculous while providing more grist for BN fire against Pakatan.

Whatever happens to this blossoming BN-Hindraf romance, we will have to see if the union is eventually solemnised. It should not if the Hindraf leaders have any political nous and honesty regarding Umno's cynical use of institutional racism through its 56-year reign, which is the root cause of national oppression of the ethnic minorities.

If BN can accept Hindraf's blueprint, something's wrong with the blueprint

I have pointed out previously that the main failure in Hindraf's blueprint is its failure to demand the eradication of institutional racism.

I have shared several fora with Hindraf leaders at which we have condemned institutional racism in Malaysia. And despite their efforts in recent years highlighting the entrenchment of racial discrimination in the constitution, I am surprised that the Hindraf blueprint does not call for the abolition of the NEP.

Pakatan cannot claim to be holier than thou because it does not condemn this institutional racism or announce readiness to abolish the NEP in its manifesto.

Change approach

Any corrective action in all economic and education policies must be based on need or sector or class and not on race with priority given to indigenous people, marginalised and poor communities.

Since its blueprint extols human rights, Hindraf should put forward its demands for all minorities and not just the Indian Malaysian community. Thus we find a gaping 'disconnect' between Hindraf's noble challenge to racial discrimination entrenched in the constitution and its 'Indians only' proposals.

And because the blueprint is couched in terms of 'Indian demands' as MIC has traditionally done, it is easy for BN to accede to the blueprint. In fact, it is back to the quintessential 'Alliance formula' of 1957 except that BN will then (if they accept Hindraf) have a new associate tagged onto the MIC.

I have also earlier pointed out that to be consistent in its human rights stand, Hindraf should also urge:

Repeal of Amendment (8A) of Article 153 that was passed during the state of emergency in 1971 and was not in the original 1957 federal constitution;

Institutionalising means testing for any access to scholarships or other entitlements;

Implementing merit-based recruitment in the civil and armed services;

Enacting an Equality Act to promote equality and non-discrimination irrespective of race, creed, religion, gender or disability with provision for an Equality and Human Rights Commission;

Institutionalising equality and human rights education at all decision-making levels, including state and non-state actors/institutions; and

Ratifying the Convention on the Eradication of Racial Discrimination.

If the Hindraf blueprint was couched in these human rights terms, do you think BN would accept it? Certainly not, because BN has always been a 'racial formula'. The coalition is the sum of its racialist parts - Umno, MCA, MIC and associates".

Core issue

Is Pakatan suffering from a mental block on the national question? Why is it averse to coopting Hindraf's blueprint, thereby losing the opportunity of an historic alliance with Hindraf? Is it because Pakatan is more purist than BN on the national question?

I don't think so because, if the Pakatan manifesto can take into account Felda settlers, there is no reason why it cannot make considerations for displaced plantation communities or the stateless, among others, that are in the post facto Gelang Patah Declaration. The DAP, as usual, are 'wise after the event', a euphemism for opportunism!

Or could it be that incorporating Hindraf's proposals would pose a threat to the jostling for seats among the Indian leaders in Pakatan? If this realpolitik is indeed one of the reasons for the Pakatan-Hindraf fallout, it is a let down of serious proportions for all Malaysians who hope for change in GE13.

And having been spurned by the Pakatan manifesto, we could only expect the fury of the Hindraf backlash against the DAP's 'plagiarism'.

No, in the end it boils down to Pakatan's failure to come to terms with the national question, and that involves taking a stand on the NEP.

Isn't it time for real change that will set our nation on a new footing of reconciliation and reconstruction, when we are no longer divided into 'races' and progressive policies can be put in place to help the truly needy?

Alas, I am afraid the 'Ubah' in Pakatan does not go far enough. (And I would ask all the homespun political philosophers to spare me their pearls of wisdom about the 'pragmatic' reasons for 'not frightening the Malays' in GE13).

Ultimately, a nation that is unequal can never be free or be at peace. Hindraf has already announced that it will be fielding candidates in several seats. Likewise, Pakatan's ambivalence toward the left, namely PSM, will likely see three-corner contests in those constituencies that PSM contests.

I am afraid this historic non-compromise between Pakatan and Hindraf in GE13 will probably go down in Malaysian history as one of the most unfortunate missed opportunities in the overthrow of BN rule.

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Source: <http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/226111>

