

Surendran ready to take on Gobala in Padang Serai

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by Terence Netto

It used to be that PKR vice-president N Surendran, a human rights lawyer, understood the label as having to do with the articulation and defence of civil liberties.

That was the conventional view of what human rights entailed for large numbers of its advocates, including him.

Surendran made a career out of this conception of human rights that was significant enough to gain him one of the appointed vice-presidential slots in PKR in late 2010, after the party's triennial elections that year.

Following the appointment, Surendran quickly expanded the ambit of his professional concerns from a focus on human rights to include advocacy in defamation and other legal issues with which party compatriots were saddled in the course of their exertions on behalf of its rallying agenda: reformasi.

But it was only when his party detailed him to take care of the parliamentary constituency of Padang Serai following the departure of the incumbent PKR MP N Gobalakrishnan to the independent benches that Surendran began to understand the economic corollary to civil liberties - like a guaranteed minimum wage, free education, subsidised day care and health care, and the like.

Beginning late 2011, in the course of frequent weekend sorties to Padang Serai from Kuala Lumpur where he is domiciled, Surendran began to discover the extents of the poverty that afflicts people subsisting on the margins of society that a lawyer like him plying his trade in the urbanised precincts of the Klang Valley rarely gets to see.

"It's incredible, really, what I got to see when I went to Padang Serai - much poverty right there before you," said Surendran, who was born in Kuantan in 1965 and educated in Alor Setar and Kangar, towns to which his postmaster father was transferred and where the genteel environs of civil servants' quarters screened him from the hardscrabble lives of the poor just over the horizon.

Incidence of poverty underestimated

True, Surendran's involvement in the legal battles in custodial death cases in the

last 10 years and as legal adviser to the Hindu Rights Action Force (Hindraf) in the mid-2000s did bring him face to face with the poverty that besets the urban poor, especially the Indian complement, in blighted pockets on the fringes of urban centres in the Klang Valley.

But in Padang Serai, the cases of poverty he encountered among single mothers struggling to bring up their kids in ramshackle living conditions, widows striving to keep body and soul together, aged solitaires without children to take care of them or with children who themselves barely eke out a living - all these underlined for Surendran the stark need for the poverty alleviation schemes in Buku Jingga, the Pakatan Rakyat manifesto for socioeconomic change in Malaysia.

It was a case of experiential knowledge supplying grounds for an imaginative grasp of Pakatan remedies for the uplift of the Malaysian poor.

"What I saw of poverty in Padang Serai furnished the rationale for Buku Jingga," said Surendran, 46, who read law at a local college and sat for the bar entrance before going into private practice where he has been for the past 20 years.

What he saw also moved him to instinctive dissent from the figures cited by the BN government about the incidence of poverty in Malaysia.

In a recent pronouncement trumpeting the success of his government's efforts at economic transformation (ETP) of the country, Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak said the ruling coalition had succeeded in reducing poverty from the level of 60 percent incidence in society at the time of independence in 1957 to 3.5 percent in relative terms and 1.7 percent at absolute measures.

"Just from the anecdotal evidence I gathered in Padang Serai, I could tell that the government figures were false and misleading," said Surendran.

He contended that the more realistic figure for the incidence of household poverty, taking the median income of Malaysian households to be RM2,841 (2009 government figures), would be 19 percent of all households.

Plight of the stateless

The disparity between the government's figures and what the anecdotal evidence that Surendran and the Pakatan leadership cohort have encountered has prompted the former to want to lead an awareness campaign on the high incidence of poverty.

But more exigent concerns like statelessness among people born and bred in the country have forced Surendran to give priority to public demonstrations to highlight their plight of residents devoid of citizenship papers.

From the middle of last year, he has been prominent in a PKR-led Pakatan campaign to gain the stateless legal status as citizens of the country.

The campaign has been successful enough to compel consensus among the Pakatan component parties that when and if they take control of Putrajaya at GE13, the issue will be resolved with all deliberate speed - within 100 days of a takeover, pledged Pakatan supremo Anwar Ibrahim.

"Statelessness, which is huge contributory factor to the incidence of poverty, is the pressing issue now," admitted Surendran.

"Also, the very nature of poverty in this country is such that it requires a complete takeover of Putrajaya by Pakatan to tackle the issue comprehensively," he opined.

It looks like it will be a full docket for this human rights advocate, regardless of whether Pakatan wins or misses Putrajaya at GE13.

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