

Ethnic politics at heart of GE13 campaign

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By John Grafilo, dpa

In multiracial Malaysia, ethnic Malays get priority in admission to schools, preference in government jobs, and a discount when buying a house.

These privileges were originally intended to be temporary, until Malays attained economic parity with other races. Affirmative action is popular with Malays - a lot of political effort goes into defending and extending them - but they are not vote winners with other races.

"Not all Chinese are rich so we also deserve support from the government and not just the Malays," said a food-stall owner who wanted to be identified only as Chia.

"There are also a lot of poor Indians that deserve as much support as the Malays," he added.

Prakash, an ethnic Indian fish trader, said the affirmative action for Malays was unjust because Indians pay the same taxes.

"Something is surely not right in this kind of arrangement."

Race and religion are at the heart of politics in the South-East Asian country, whose population of 29 million is 65 per cent Malay and indigenous people, 26 per cent Chinese, and 8 per cent Indian, with other groups making up only 1 per cent.

Defenders of Malay rights say their status needs protecting, while others are resentful of the privileges they enjoy, and see the danger of a possible Islamist state.

The National Front has fiercely protected and expanded these privileges, a strategy which has kept the Malay vote loyal and the United Malays National Organisation party, now part of the National Front alliance, in power for more than half a century since independence.

Former prime minister and National Front member Dr Mahathir Mohamad played the race card to boost support for the alliance in the southern state of Johor.

He warned voters that the meritocracy pushed by Lim Kit Siang, leader of the

predominantly Chinese opposition

Democratic Action Party, would spell the end of affirmative action for Malays.

"This will result in the Malays becoming less and less qualified and poorer," he added. "Meritocracy is not about sharing but about the winners taking all."

Opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim has said that if he wins, he would implement affirmative action based on needs, not race.

Anwar, a Malay, is the leader of the opposition PKR, and ran as the candidate for a coalition of the PKR and other opposition parties in 2008, depriving the National Front of its two-thirds majority for the first time.

He has said that the main beneficiaries of the provision have been the members of the ruling coalition, who misused it to secure government contracts and subsidies for their business interests.

He has cited several cases, including that of a son of former prime minister and National Front member Mahathir Mohamad whose company won a multimillion-dollar contract with state-owned oil and gas firm Petronas.

But Chandra Muzaffar, a political scientist and Islamic activist, said the affirmative action has been invaluable.

The provision was instrumental in reducing poverty to 2 per cent from 65 per cent when Malaysia gained independence in 1957, he said.

"It is a policy and programme which has succeeded to a great extent," he told dpa. "It accelerated development of the Malay community over the past 30 or 40 years, which has stabilized the ethnic situation. Now, you have a significant Malay middle class."

"We must get rid of the abuses," he conceded, but the provision itself was necessary "as part of our nation-building process."

The issues of ethnicity and religion in politics were here to stay due to the country's demographic makeup, he said.

"You just have to manage it. You can't wish it away."

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