'People kept poor to ensure support can be bought'
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By Koh Jun Lin

The incentive for politicians to keep people poor so that their political support can be bought will persist if problems related to political campaign financing are not resolved, said academician Bridget Welsh.

"I think we are already seeing some of that. What is happening in East Malaysia in terms of poverty really raises questions, because vote buying has been going on there for a long period of time and they are not really fundamentally changing the standards of living in these states for the majority of the people," she said.

She was speaking at a seminar at iium ge13 seminar 070713 james chinUniversiti Islam Antarabangsa (UIA) Malaysia today, where she was asked what the implications are if the problem persists.

Earlier during her presentation and a separate presentation by another speaker James Chin (right), both speakers agreed that the 13th general election saw the most expensive political campaign in Malaysian history, but differed on whether RM1 billion or RM2 billion was spent.

"The question now is: Who is giving all this money? When businessmen give money, it is never for free. There are always some sort of strings even though you cannot see the strings up front.

NONE"Are we selling Parliament to the richest party? Do we want to be in a system where, like in America, only multi-millionaires and billionaires can run for elections?" said Chin, in arguing for a public debate on this and some other issues.

In answering the question from the audience, he warned that election campaigns would continue to become more expensive and the government would become divided into special interest groups.

"You already see this with major government infrastructure projects. If nothing is done, I can guarantee you, I can think of four major business conglomerates, which will dominate the government," he said, without naming them.

Campaign financing

Welsh added that problems with campaign financing would also encourage

corruption and for businesses to have ties with the government.

In addition, she said money would be diverted away from long-term development in favour of winning votes in the short term, hence widening income inequality.

constituencies delineation forum 080613 bridget welshCommenting on trends in the political economy, Welsh (left) said vote-buying was previously prevalent in East Malaysia, but has now increased in West Malaysia with more private businesses involved than before.

She agreed with Chin's assessment that elections would continue to become more expensive, and added that the impact is worse on the incumbent government because it would be ‘burdened' with spending more money - often public funds.

"The process of electoral reform is urgent especially in the area of managing finances. It is in the government's interests to begin to reform the campaign financing.

"It is they who will have to spend the money," she said.

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