

Why punish the children, Mr Prime Minister?

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COMMENT The unveiling of the latest budget and its aftermath has been notable for two developments that seem to epitomise the racial bias of BN and the state system which it controls, as well as revealing of the racist character of the country's major stakeholders.

The first was the disclosure of an allocation of \$50 million each to national-type Chinese and Tamil primary schools, as compared with the allocation of RM450 million to the Sekolah Rendah Kebangsaan (SK).

No doubt, the two mother tongue medium schools have a smaller student population than the SRJK or national-type medium schools and should not have expected to receive the same quantum of funding.

At the same time, it is unfair to provide the more than 1,200 Chinese medium schools and over 600,000 students enrolled in them with such a miniscule allocation.

Not only are students from the Chinese stream drawn from the Chinese community but the SRJK (C) also have a considerable non-Chinese enrolment, estimated at more than 10 percent of the total. So not only are Chinese young being discriminated against but also their fellow non-Chinese pupils; and the multi-racial staff employed in these schools.

Explain the inequitable allocations

If the politicians and their civil servant functionaries want to argue that SRJK (C) and (T) are less deserving of equal treatment than the SKs in the national budget, then they should do it openly and explain why the allocation - as described by one opposition leader - only amounts to "peanuts".

There may be good reasons, such as previously generous allocations in the past, so that these mother tongue schools already have all the classrooms or facilities they need as compared with SKs that may have been deprived of similar infrastructure.

Or the SRJKs have attained such high standards (as measured by UPSR attainment) compared with SK schools so that they do not require equal treatment. Hence greater priority and resources should be allocated to the latter to raise their academic standards.

Few in the country will argue with an approach that provides a larger allocation of resources to schools from poor areas - rural and urban - and where students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds need special targeting or assistance to close the gap with their peer group.

But no reason is given. Instead there is a wall of official silence on the matter. Members of the public can then be forgiven for linking the budgetary allocations to the speech delivered by the Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak at the opening of the annual general assembly of the MCA.

The budget as a political, racial instrument

In his speech, Najib made two important points. One was that that Putrajaya could do more for the Chinese community, provided they give their support to the BN ruling coalition.

“You have to do your part, you cannot demand and then support DAP, you cannot demand (and then) support Pakatan Rakyat... you demand and support BN, and we will be fair to the Chinese community,” Najib said in his speech.

The only logical inference we can take away from this statement is that the budget has been used to punish the Chinese for not throwing their support behind the MCA and BN during the last general election.

Put bluntly, the message is “You vote the opposition and we will punish you wherever and whenever we can. We may not be able to do it in the budgetary allocation for health or transport or other sectors where the allocations are more race neutral. But in sectors where we can draw the line on the basis of race, we will do it.”

Don't victimise the young

The above may seem too harsh a conclusion to infer. After all, Najib in the same speech had also reassured the Chinese community of its right to mother tongue education, reiterating that the right is enshrined in the Federal Constitution and in the laws of the land, besides being included in the National Education Blueprint.

And Najib has also repeatedly reminded that he is the prime minister of and for all Malaysians.

Perhaps it has been an allocation that evaded the prime minister's scrutiny, since it stems from a ministry outside his control; and over which he has had to give in to the opinion of his colleague, Deputy Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin.

Perhaps too, the deputy prime minister, who is also the minister of education, is without fault as the allocation has been 'sneaked in', without his knowledge, by overzealous civil servants seeking to burnish the image of the deputy prime minister as a Malay nationalist or by a racially-biased segment of his ministry's senior management.

Whatever the reason, it is important that the allocation be revisited and revised. The BN government, the Ministry of Finance and other ministries should not be playing racial politics with the country's budget, especially the type of racial politics that makes victims of the innocent young.

Lastly, it is not only the allocation for primary school education that should be revisited. The entire budgetary allocation for education and training needs to be purged of any racial, political or other unjustifiable bias that is publicly indefensible.

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