

The call for an ombudsman
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Dr Collin Abraham

The Barisan Nasional win in the Ijok by-election last Saturday is unlikely to address the question of restructuring the Permodalan Nasional Berhad, with a view of offering an equitable stake in the redistribution of assets to the mainly Indian workers as taken up in 'The Dawn Raid'.

In fact, any hope that because the MIC Indian candidate (K Parthiban) won the situation would be different, can be said to be irrelevant.

Indeed, as the evidence during the election campaign also indicated, this scenario, even had the PKR won with its ex-PNB CEO share-holding candidate Khalid Ibrahim, might have even been worse.

The PNB has recently successfully concluded the merger of all the larger rubber/oil palm plantations under its control.

Apart from the sheer benefits of large scale production, the new conglomerate has now decided to embark on massive construction projects including prestigious housing and other lucrative building projects.

While some small housing projects on individual estates had been undertaken for some time with the collusion of developers (where workers whose families had lived in these areas literally for a century had been evicted), the new projects planned are of a much more ambitious nature.

This is because interestingly, much of the extensive land on which the proposed building construction expansion is to take place in fact already belongs to the respective estates.

On the basis of my research findings, this land was originally alienated to the estates on the demand of the rubber barons in London during the economic depression of the 1920's.

Complete marginalisation

This may sound paradoxical, but it was then argued that while the Stevenson Rubber Restriction Scheme needed to be introduced to curtail rubber production (mainly among Malay rubber smallholders), estates should in fact be allowed to acquire new lands for replanting once the depression was over.

It would appear that with the shift to oil-palm cultivation subsequently, this alienated "surplus" land had not been fully utilized so that with the recent merger of the PNB estates, this same land is now available without cost, for the building of massive construction development projects.

As is well recognised in the Malaysian context, there is normally a strong political dimension to development projects particularly where it involved huge profits and this also applies to the situation in question.

The involvement of a former very senior officer of government as well as a former Deputy Prime Minister in the PNB controlled industries further endorses the possibility that this expansion exercise will emerge as perhaps one of the biggest building projects in the country now and in the future.

Therefore the earlier marginalized and disenfranchised position of the estate workers, mostly Indian but now with some Malays as well, becomes complete.

Whereas, previously they had earlier been 'passed by' even when as workers they were directly involved in the production process of rubber and oil-palm, their total alienation from involvement in this building construction (where they have no locus standi) makes their deprived and depressed socio-economic position almost complete.

Once again this means that because they have no stake they will not benefit from the profits that will accrue to the shareholders now or in the future.

Urgent need for an ombudsman

Therefore this article calls on all NGO's and professional bodies concerned with the dismal plight of the working classes in the PNB controlled rubber and oil palm industries to appeal to the Yang-Di-Pertuan Agong to appoint an ombudsman to take control and restructure these industries as corporate entities giving a stake to the working classes to enjoy the rights and privileges that are rightfully due to them.

Indeed, it also relevant to highlight the fact that on the basis of my UNDP study (2002) a similar situation also exists in Felda where the bureaucracy had taken full control of the management and decision-making process to the detriment of title-holding former settlers as well their second, third and now the emerging forth generation settlers.

The Prime Minister had strongly endorsed the listing of settlers on the stock exchange but nothing came of this because neither Felda nor the EPU was able to implement the structural changes involved.

It follows therefore that even Felda as one of the largest organizations in the planting industry should come within the jurisdiction of the ombudsman though perhaps this should await the restructuring of the PNB group as a matter of priority in the first instance.

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