

'Orang Asli can no longer be taken for granted'
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The Orang Asli community is becoming more politically aware and can no longer be presumed to be blind supporters of BN, said Pahang PKR Orang Asal bureau vice-chairperson Bob Manolan.

NONEThis is owing to discontentment among the Orang Asli folks, particularly following the government's announcement that it would amend the Aboriginal People's Act (Act 134), said Bob.

"If you look at the present scenario, the Orang Asli are still (regarded as) the fixed deposit for BN. But the scenario has changed in a few places," he added.

He gave an example of the aboriginal community in Pahang, where PKR has set up the Orang Asli affairs bureau which serves to advocate political awareness among the communities.

Bob (above) explained that PKR had to step in because the NGOs representing the Orang Asli populace - estimated at about 150,000 nation-wide - are only geared towards specific issues such as education, land rights, welfare and unity.

NONETo date, the Orang Asli Organisation of Peninsular Malaysia (Poasm) is the largest body. Formed in 1976, its membership has swelled to 26,000.

Apart from that, the more affluent Orang Asli have also become members of the Orang Asli Graduates Associations (PSOA), and there is the Orang Asli Village Networks of Peninsular Malaysia (JKOASM) with chapters in Perak, Pahang, Selangor, Johor, Negeri Sembilan and Melaka.

Last resort

A grassroots PKR leader in Jerantut, Pahang, Yusri Ahon (below, right) pointed out that PKR branches have mushroomed in Orang Asli settlements.

NONE"Almost every month, there are new branches (being set up) because they know that the last resort to change policies or the law, is through politics.

"The Orang Asli community has come to this realisation, and has entered politics, to pressure the government. If they (aborigines) don't, the government will still be in their comfort zone," he added.

Bob said that on his part, he felt that the plans laid out for the Orang Asli by the government is not a good way to better their livelihood.

He also scoffed at the 10th Malaysia Plan, which purportedly aimed at eradicating poverty among the Orang Asli by 2020.

He feared that the Orang Asli would, on the contrary, in the future suffer worse, citing the commercial replanting programme on their land by federal smallholders and land agencies Risdan and Felcra of rubber and oil palm crops.

"But the harvest was not for the Orang Asli but for the contractors, though JHEOA (claimed) that they are using the Orang Asli-owned land for the development of the Orang Asli community," Bob added.

kampung orang asli sungai tesong 120208 children"Before they acquired the land, JHEOA with Risda and Felcra pledged sweet promises (to the land owners). (They said,) 'After this you don't have to work. Just go to the bank and withdraw money every month.'"

"But after the (scheme) took place, their previous income of RM400 to RM500 per month was reduced to RM200. This happened in Bentong (Pahang)," he said.

He also said that disbursement of aid to the Orang Asli would not be enough to eradicate poverty, and claimed leakages in channeling the funds.

Government noncommittal

"There is a certain amount of money allocated for the Orang Asli community each year, but looking at past trends, allocation alone is not enough when the money does not reach the Orang Asli community," said Bob.

Bob also said that the government should have shown their commitment in giving out land titles to the Orang Asli by measuring the land themselves.

But the aboriginal communities had to do it themselves to justify their ownership of the land.

This effort was initiated by JKOASM which trained the villagers to measure their own land.

This process is actively being undertaken in Perak, while Pahang has seen four Orang Asli villages properly measured using the Global Positioning System (GPS).

NONEThey were inspired to do this after witnessing the case of Sagong Tasi and six other plaintiffs, who won a 15-year legal battle against the federal government, the then BN-led Selangor government, Malaysian Highway Authority (MHA) and contractor United Engineers Malaysia Bhd (UEM).

Sagong and 26 other Temuan families in Selangor obtained RM6.5 million in compensation for their native customary land which was seized to build a highway to the Kuala Lumpur International Airport.

Bob explained that the GPS technology could provide stronger proof of ownership of Orang Asli land, even though evidence such as old artifacts should suffice.

Yet, Bob cautioned that as far as the Sagong Tasi case is concerned, the law sided with the aborigines only after the Pakatan Rakyat-led state government had withdrawn its appeal last year.

That is why the Orang Asli need a political association with a party that is more sympathetic to their struggle, he said.

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