

Federal-state relations a critical election issue
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Power must be devolved, decision-making must be decentralised, and development funds must be shared all the way down.

An important issue in the next general election, no doubt, must be the restructuring of federal-state relations. Our federal system of government needs to be transformed from a highly- centralised to a more equal and cooperative one. Indeed, cooperative federal systems are the norm throughout the world not only in Canada, Australia and Switzerland, but also in India, South Africa and Nigeria.

This means that more devolution of power must occur. As well, decentralisation of decision-making and, of course, disbursement of development funds from the federal government to the state governments. And the civil service must act more professionally to serve the government of the day, regardless of party affiliation.

Two years of Pakatan Rakyat rule especially in Penang and Selangor have highlighted how centralised our political system is. It has also highlighted how the BN federal government can dominate Pakatan-led state governments as a result of the former's control of development funds.

Whereas such funds are channelled to the state governments as in the cases of Pahang, Johor and Malacca which are BN-led, the same development funds are channelled to federal-appointed State Development Officers in the cases of Pakatan-led states. This is so although Pakatan state governments have been duly elected into office by the rakyat.

The recent war of words between Penang Chief Minister Lim Guan Eng and the federally appointed State Development Officer Nik Ali bin Yunus on July 20-21 over the Botanical Gardens expansion project highlights how the federal government dominates the state government.

First, the Garden's expansion project falls under the control of the Tourism Ministry rather than the Penang state government or the Penang Municipal Council. To any Penangite, surely the state or municipal authority would be better informed of how best to carry out the expansion of the Garden.

And even if the federal Ministry was in charge, why did it not devolve power and funds to the state and local authorities? One can imagine that if the state-government was BN-led, there might have been more consultation and perhaps even de-centralisation of decision-making. In this regard, we should recall how the federal government had disbursed to the BN-led Malacca state

government its share of the heritage conservation funds but had denied the Pakatan-led Penang state government its share of the same, channelling it instead to the Penang Representative Office of Khazanah Nasional Berhad, which is owned by the Finance Ministry. Yet Malacca and Georgetown share joint listing as Unesco heritage sites.

This episode also highlights a second way of federal domination. Lim blamed Nik Ali, who is responsible for overseeing the channelling of all federal allocations for projects in Penang, for 'openly and blatantly sabotaging the state government'. It is significant that the SDO chose to declare the chief inister as biadap at a press conference called by Penang Umno

leaders.

Isn't a civil servant supposed to serve the government of the day? And in the case of Nik Ali, should he not be serving the interests of the Penang state government to which he has been appointed State Development Officer, notwithstanding he is a federal appointee?

Indeed, it is not only Nik Ali who has facilitated federal domination over Penang, the SDOs in the other Pakatan-led states have also been giving the Pakatan-led governments in Selangor, Kelantan and Kedah a hard time, as the menteri besars of those states have complained from time to time.

In this matter, we need to recall how the PAS-led Kelantan government and the Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS)-led Sabah governments were bullied by the federal government authorities during the 1990s. Then, so-called Federal Development Offices were set up in both states in order to bypass the state governments too.

No wonder, federal appointees like Nik Ali consider it their duty to serve the BN federal government over the Pakatan-state governments. Yet, no amount of ill-mannered name-calling by the SDO will whitewash popular opinion that most federal appointees to the state government have been acting very unprofessionally. They have been biased towards the BN government rather than acting fairly towards the Pakatan state governments.

Underlying the recent exchange of words between the Penang CM and the SDO, therefore, is this discriminatory way by which the Pakatan-led states are treated by the federal BN government. In effect, they have not given due recognition to the wishes of the rakyat who voted the Pakatan-led governments into office in five states in the 2008 election.

In the recent case concerning the construction of two monstrous arches at the entrance to the Botanic Gardens, which look completely out of place and one of which is tilting, there had been minimum consultation with the rakyat prior to their construction. Concerned NGOs had complained to the Penang state government about the cutting of trees, the cementing over of various parts of the gardens to build a car park and hawker complex and the construction of the arches.

Now that the Tourism Ministry has declared that the arches will be brought down, it is clear to the NGOs and concerned Penangites that the Garden expansion project is indeed a federal project, and that the SDO does, in fact, have oversight of the project and should be held responsible for this wastage.

In this regard, perhaps the NGOs should have directed their complaints to the federal authorities in the first place. Whichever the case, there was no consultation with the rakyat by the federal Tourism Ministry until it had become obvious that a disaster was in the making, when it was discovered that one of the ugly arches was tilting. And of course, there had been no consultation whatsoever on the part of the federal-appointed SDO even up till now. (Of course, he would plead that it is not his job to do so since he is only involved in disbursing the funds)

That said, the NGOs believe that the Penang state government could have been more proactive and acted more responsibly in the face of such ill-conceived projects, even if they were federally funded. It could have intervened to prevent this wastage of RM150,000 and the destruction of the local Botanic Garden environment. In this regard, it must share a part of the blame.

One way to prevent such wastage is to make sure that restructuring of federal-state elections become a priority for all the parties in the next elections. Power must be devolved, decision- making must be de-centralised, and development funds must be shared all the way down.

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