

Ethnic-based economic congresses rapped
Malaysiakini.com
August 17, 2010

Economic congresses could be good for obtaining public feedback, but in multi-ethnic Malaysia, such ethnic-based events are now being used as an avenue for political bargaining instead.

Organisers are now using such platforms to protect their own community's interests above others, laments Institute of Democracy and Economic Affairs chief executive Wan Saiful Wan Jan.

"What was originally intended to discuss business affairs has turned into a bargaining tool (between ethnic communities and the government)," he said, commenting on the MCA-sponsored Chinese Economic Congress (CEC) last weekend.

Participants of the congress had pushed for greater liberalisation from ethnic-based affirmative action towards a needs-based one.

NONEIn response, Prime Minister Najib Razak assured the community that he will consider their demands.

In return, however, Najib said the community must "reach out to the other communities and setting up cross-ethnic partnerships."

The situation is such that the business community is now uninterested in making decisions that will benefit the business environment, said Wan Saiful (right).

"What the business community should have done was to just start doing things (like having genuine inter-ethnic partnerships) that benefit them, and not say 'we will only do this if you do that'," he said.

He added that while Najib, as a politician, may feel inclined to such posturing, the business community should know better.

"People in business should be more mature. You deal internationally where you are treated not as a Malay, Indian or Chinese, so why do you behave like one at home?" he asked.

'Talk less, act more'

Likewise, Ratings Agency Malaysia's chief economist Yeah Kim Leng said that such ethnic-based congresses can be more divisive than constructive.

nazir razakPolitical posturing at events like the Perkasa-led Malay Consultative Council and the CEC, he said, can sway the government "to take populist decisions, rather than hard-hitting measures".

Even the CEC proved that an ethnic approach is "outmoded", as speakers like Malay banker Nazir Razak (right) and Chinese property developer Liew Kee Sin unwittingly advocated against their respective community interests.

CIMB chief Nazir had blasted the implementation of the New Economic Policy (NEP), which had largely favoured the Malay and bumiputera community, for being abused.

Liew, who leads SP Setia Bhd, in turn claimed that the Chinese community has benefited from the NEP, despite the preferential treatment of bumiputeras.

Yeah said it was far better for the government and the business community to talk less and act more.

"People are a bit tired of talking. These structural problems we are discussing about were on the table ten years ago.

"The main hurdle right now is policy execution...investors are still concerned over Malaysia's track record," he said.

Like Wan Saiful, Yeah said that the business community would do well to spend less time congregating over policy plans and focus instead on developing resolutions, which currently read as "suggestions to the government" to "actionable programs".

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Source : <http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/140349>