

Dr Subra : March 8 an awakening
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What had unraveled on March 8 will be discussed even decades from now. This was the day the Barisan Nasional (BN) fortress cracked. MCPX

The date is also significant for MIC since it marked the party's worst ever performance in half a century.

A party that was accustomed to the sweetness of victory was suddenly forced to taste the bitterness of defeat in 18 of its 28 seats.

MIC's future and relevance have since come under intense scrutiny.

MIC candidates announcement 220208 happyIts leaders however believe that MIC will rise again. And one such leader is secretary-general Dr S Subramaniam.

The doctor's prognosis is that while the wound is deep, the ailing party can - with the right treatment - be nursed back to health.

Subramaniam is the new Indian representative in the cabinet after nearly three decades. He joins the elite fraternity as the human resources minister after veteran party president and former works minister S Samy Vellu was vanquished in his stronghold.

On his first day in office at the administrative capital of Putrajaya yesterday, Subramaniam spoke to Malaysiakini about his appointment, the status of MIC and its future.

Great expectations

The polls, according to him, not only bore testimony to the political awakening of the Indian community, but also served to jolt MIC and its leaders.

To deny that the recent events had no effect will be nothing short of a fallacy, he said, adding that the party is now changing, re-equipping and re-organising its strategies to face the challenges that lay ahead.

Subramaniam is also well aware of the community's expectations of him as the sole Indian cabinet member, a position which he never - even in his 'wildest dreams' - had expected to land.

dr s subramaniam interview 210308 05" My initial reaction was that it was a responsibility bestowed because of a rather unfortunate situation. I have prepared myself physically and mentally to meet up to the new challenges. I am sure I will fulfill the role effectively," he said.

"Of course there are expectations from the community that being the sole Indian representative in the cabinet that I will be vocalising their aspirations and future towards their satisfaction.

"I am completely aware of that need and in this present circumstance, the representation must not only be done, but the results of this representation must be felt by the people...if we were to have an impact on the future political direction of the Indian community."

The wildfire

On what caused the MIC to suffer heavy losses in the general election, the party secretary-general listed several factors.

With time not in their favour, he said, the party had tried in vain to contain the 'wildfire' which engulfed the Indian community.

"There were grievances within the Indian community, we were aware of it. We have represented these grievances and there have been responses from the government. But there was a growing perception in the community of a feeling of unfairness," he explained.

In the past, Subramaniam said, the party was able manage this feeling by explaining the situation to the community as well as "living with it and progressing along with it."

hindraf british petition rally 251107 malaysian flags"But the events which occurred in the last few months provoked a section of the community to question everything which was enforced before. When they did that, whatever that we (MIC) have done did not appear sufficient or adequate as far as their subjective assessment went."

After this force was triggered, Subramaniam said, the sentiments were exploited by the opposition for political mileage.

"They amplified it, they spread it...so it became a wildfire like thing and our attempts to contain it by meeting the people and targetted groups...probably met with some success, but I think there was not enough time between the onset of these events and the calling of the elections for us to overcome all this.

"So when we went into the elections, we knew we will lose some seats but not as many as what we lost. We knew probably in Penang and Kedah, we would have problems in those areas because of the ground feeling. But we never thought we would lose all seats in Perak, that came as a shock."

Younger generation

Subramaniam also conceded that MIC lost much support among the younger generation of voters, especially those with access to the alternative media.

"They were exposed to a lot of information that was negative to the ruling government. I think here Barisan Nasional as a whole...we failed to provide alternate information to what was being produced by our opponents.

"So that generation got influenced by one set of information that was available to them. I think a great proportion of that generation would have voted against us," he said, adding that this was also revealed in the party's analysis of the voting trends.

Apart from turning their backs on MIC, he said the younger generation also influenced their

elders - who were traditional supporters of the party - to cast their ballots for the opposition.

"For example in my area, children who went back home from KL to vote affected their parents who were strong supporters of us by telling them things to the contrary ... it was a wave," he said, adding that modern technology helped to propel this wave.

Divisive components

To regain lost ground, Subramaniam stated that MIC must look into several factors.

subramaniam samy vellu and micOne of them being unifying the community by bringing the various divisive components - such as former deputy president S Subramaniam's faction and the splinter Indian Progressive Front (IPF) groups - back into the fold.

Next, is targeting the younger generation. This, Subramaniam said, requires a complete new set of strategies.

"This will include the usage of the alternative media, fully and effectively. So the younger generation will be exposed to information on whatever we are doing and the aspirations of the party and the community as well as opening the doors to them.

"There was this complaint that MIC never made any attempts to bring in new people," he said. "The party will now work towards becoming more open and attractive."

He assured that nobody will be prevented from playing an active role in the party.

According to Subramaniam, another weakness which requires focus is MIC branches.

"Our party structure is state, division and branch. State is the coordinating body, divisions is where the power base is now. Branches is where the connectivity with the grassroots is.

"We found that at the branch level, we have been weakened. We want to strengthen the branches so that the branches are active and have members who are relevant...to create the connectivity between MIC and the local community," he said.

Temple demolitions

The MIC leader also stressed on the need for the party to resolve issues which he described as being "core to the heart." This includes temple demolitions.

rimba jaya temple 021107 back portion"We have discussed (this issue) and the government is completely aware. We want to regularise this thing so that events of that kind do not come forth again.

"Tamil schools is another emotive issue. The education minister (Hishammuddin Hussein) has given word to us, even prior to the elections, that he will resolve issues pertaining to partially-aided and fully-aided Tamil schools so that Tamil schools will have adequate funding.

"So these are agendas that we will be following very passionately to ensure that these

things are resolved to the satisfaction of the community, so that the community will feel that we still are representing its aspirations and feelings," he said.

As for the younger generation, Subramaniam said the party will look into training, employment and their future.

"(In) government service employment, we are already seeing a trend towards a small group of non-Malays. I want to attract more Indian youths to participate in the training programmes which are available here (human resources ministry) so that their skills levels will increase. With this, their employability and income will increase.

"By providing them with adequate training, higher skills and higher employment (opportunities), I feel that the core issues facing the youth can be addressed," he added.

Subramaniam believes that if MIC can resolve the main problems that plague the community as well as help elevate their living standards, the party will be able to gain their trust.

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