

A step in the right direction

His Malay rhetoric and all that *keris*-kissing last year went down badly with non-Malays. But Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein Onn is winning friends with his approach on a hot issue, namely the future of Chinese schools in the country.

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INSIGHT
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WHEN Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein Onn arrived for a Chinese New Year gathering in his Semborong constituency last week, the reception was particularly warm and boisterous.

Initially, his aides thought that it was because of his festive-looking crimson batik shirt.

When the speeches were over, the mainly Chinese dinner guests began milling around the Education Minister to pose for photographs with him.

As the evening wore on, it became clear that Hishammuddin's star appeal at the gathering had less to do with his stylish shirt or boyish good looks than with an interview he had given to the *Sin Chew* daily and which was published that very day.

"Some of the guests had brought copies of the Chinese vernacular newspaper and they were asking him to autograph the news report," said Johor Umno Youth chief Razali Ibrahim who was at the gathering.

Hishammuddin's interview, splashed over four pages, had dwelled extensively on an issue close to Chinese hearts - Chinese schools and education.

More importantly, he gave his assurances on a number of key areas in Chinese education:

- THE government would not close down Chinese schools;
- NO objections to building new Chinese schools but the priority would be to relocate poorly enrolled schools to areas of high demand;
- RESOLVING the shortage of Chinese school teachers and
- IMPROVING the standard of Chinese primary schools.

"It went down well with the community as a whole although some of us prefer to wait and see," said Tang Ah Chai, CEO of the Kuala Lumpur and Selangor Chinese Assembly Hall.

It was apparently the most comprehensive statement that Hishammuddin, now into his third year as Education Minister, has made on these fundamental issues.

"What he said in the interview cleared a lot of doubts that parents and educationists had about government policy on Chinese schools," said *Sin Chew* group chief editor Siew Nyoke Chow.

The interview was a talking point in Chinese circles for days and even members of Dong Jiao Zong (DJZ), the powerful Chinese education movement and opinion-shaper, praised the minister, describing him as a "new generation" Umno leader.

The Chinese educationists were particularly impressed with Hishammuddin's stand that the Razak Report was a dated document and that it was impossible to use Bahasa Malaysia as the sole medium in Chinese schools.

The issue of Chinese education is big for the simple reason that up to 95% of Chinese primary school goes attend Chinese schools.

Chinese politicians ignore the issue at their own peril.

Besides, the vernacular school system for many Chinese is not just about education or being more marketable.

They see it as their right to their mother tongue, and that is what makes the issue so political and emotive.



A politician of his times: Hishammuddin had to step out of his comfort zone to make some pretty bold decisions on Chinese schools.

DJZ has had a stormy, even confrontational, history with the government.

They have viewed the Umno-led Barisan Nasional with suspicion, accusing it of suppressing the growth and existence of Chinese schools.

However, relations have grown more rational in the last decade or so, although no less political.

National leaders are beginning to understand the role of Chinese schools in the national and regional context, especially with the emergence of the China economy.

"We feel the MCA is also more serious and determined about the education cause than ever before," said the headmaster of a well-known Chinese school in Malacca.

It may also have to do with the fact that Datuk Seri Ong Ka Ting is one of only two MCA presidents who are Chinese educated.

He not only speaks fluent Chinese, but also reads and writes Chinese.

Moreover, Ong and Hishammuddin have always had a sound relationship and consult each other away from the media glare.

But for sure, times have changed and Hishammuddin has no choice but to be a

politician of his times.

Basically, he is also a rather diligent minister who actually studies his files.

And although he does get a bit rhetorical and emotional at times, when he puts his mind to a task, he usually gets it done.

Said his most senior aide: "His stand is that Chinese schools is a fact of life, a national reality. The people who attend those schools are Malaysians, part of our human capital, and like everyone else they deserve to get a good education."

Just three months ago, after a meeting with an MCA Youth delegation led by Datuk Liow Tiong Lai, Hishammuddin announced the construction of a new Chinese school and some RM2.1mil in grants for Chinese schools. The announcement made headlines in every Chinese newspaper.

"In the last 50 years, there have been only a total of nine new Chinese schools. Four of them were approved by Datuk Hishammuddin," said Siew.

In that sense, some say that the Umno Youth leader may have actually done more for Chinese schools than any other Education Minister in history.

»Hisham is no racist. What he's doing now is not related to elections or his image as some people think. He recognises that Chinese education is a big resource that needs to be strengthened and opened up«

A CLOSE FRIEND

Another rare moment in the politics of Chinese schools may also be on the cards.

Hishammuddin has said that he is willing to meet with DJZ, which, if it takes place, will be the second between the group and an Education Minister.

The first such meeting was when Tan Sri Musa Mohamed was Education Minister.

But the meeting went badly and Musa reportedly walked off midway.

Hishammuddin is prepared to meet the group in good faith, minus terms and conditions.

But those in the Chinese education camp say they want the meeting to be more than a courtesy call.

"It should not be just a hello there, take a few photos then bye-bye and go home. It will be good if they discuss some serious issues," said Tang.

Quite naturally, some will wonder whether Hishammuddin's recent gestures are signs of approaching elections or whether he is trying to make amends after the ill will that the Umno Youth wing whipped up during the last party general assembly.

"Hisham is no racist. What he's doing now is not related to elections or his image as some people think. He recognises that Chinese education is a big resource that needs to be strengthened and opened up.

"He's been in and out of China, he has met Chinese businessmen, he understands how important Chinese is to the country's future," said a close friend who has known Hishammuddin since the latter's days as a practising lawyer.

The minister, the friend added, wants to enhance the Chinese school system in a way that can benefit the country.

"He is a powerful figure and the fact that he's willing to meet (DJZ) is a conciliatory gesture. He has often said that the issue of Chinese schools is core to Chinese society and values. If it can be dealt with in a positive fashion, it will take a lot negativity out of national politics and that will be so much better for all of us," said the friend.

At the same time, Hishammuddin is surrounded by some very staunch Malay nationalists in his ministry who have strong views on language and religion.

These forces, said the friend, are constantly pulling around him but if anyone can make his way through this, it is likely to be Hishammuddin. But it will take time.