

Malaysia's anemic middle class

Opinion News - Monday, December 31, 2007

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Since 1998, street protests have been relatively commonplace in Malaysian politics, but the latest rally by the Indian minority represents a new twist.

It is important not only because it was organized on racial lines -- hence challenging Malaysia's racial makeup that has lasted for more than three decades -- but also it was probably the first in a long time to raise bread-and-butter issues in Malaysian society.

Late in November, more than 10,000 members of Malaysia's Indian community spoke out against the "injustice" of the Malay-biased affirmative action program under the New Economic Policy (NEP). A street protest of about the same size took place early in November, in which people demanded free and fair elections.

That the Malaysian poor rose up to protest, instead of the middle class, is a surprise.

It is the attitude of the middle class that could help shed some light on why democracy is all too rare in Malaysia.

More than 30 years of economic patronage from the ruling UMNO party, which favors the Malay majority in its distribution of resources, has given rise to a complacent middle class that has been resistant to any change that would threaten its privileged position.

In addition, an array of coercive measures, the most notorious being the draconian Internal Security Act (ISA), have taken away most of the Malaysian people's political liberty and turned them into subservient citizens.

The Reformasi movement, which was sparked by the sacking of then-deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim, was a shot at political awakening for Malaysia. Numerous non-governmental organizations and political parties cropped up in the wake of the Reformasi, strengthening the movement against the ruling regime.

However, Reformasi proved to be short-lived.

Members of the middle class have completely shunned the clarion call of Reformasi. Parti Keadilan Nasional (PKN), led by the wife of Anwar, Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, exposed the alleged corrupt practices of the regime, in the hope of appealing to "liberal" Malays and those who valued the economic growth fostered by UMNO but were alienated by the government.

The issue proved to be a hard sell and the PKN failed miserably. In the last general election in 2004, the PKN's share of the votes declined from 11.5 percent in 1999 to 8.27 percent, while its share of seats in the parliament fell from 2.6 percent to a meager 0.45

percent.

UMNO-led coalition Barisan Nasional saw its vote totals rise from 56.6 percent in 1999 to 62.3 percent in 2004.

A sense of a deep mistrust toward the reform movement appears likely to prevail among Malaysia's middle class.

A Malaysian friend, who was raised in privileged surroundings, keeps telling me that "Anwar (Ibrahim) and his friends should not take to the street and threaten the stability and prosperity that we have long enjoyed."

The unwillingness of the middle class to punish a corrupt regime in Malaysia has only bolstered the resolve of the elite to perpetuate their stranglehold over society. This will only make it more difficult to establish a true democratic polity.

The likelihood of Malaysia emulating Indonesia's experience of a mass movement-driven democratic transition led by a disaffected middle class is very low, simply because there is no dissatisfaction among the middle class to begin with.

The UMNO regime has not reached the point where it has started alienating the middle class, the way Soeharto did with his odious rent-seeking activities.

Middle-class inertia has been compounded by the unity of the elite.

For most of modern Malaysian history, major political changes have been the result of wheeling and dealing by the country's elite class.

In the late 1960s, these elites eschewed democracy, feeling it had bred the instability that culminated in the rioting that began on May 13th, 1969. In its wake, a handful of Malay leaders, with the consent of Chinese and Indian elites, drew up the NEP. This would later serve as a foundation for affirmative action for Malays.

The Reformasi movement itself, ironically, was the byproduct of a fierce battle between two prominent members of the elite, Anwar and then-prime minister Mahathir Mohamad, over how to cope with a raging financial crisis.

What started as an inter-elite conflict began to spill over into the streets, involving the masses.

But Malaysian elites are known to be cohesive. After a bitter conflict, top politicians traditionally embrace those who have fallen from grace.

All of these elements factor into democracy in Malaysia being curtailed. A quasi-democracy will likely reign for years to come in our neighboring country.

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