

Discontent over racial bias simmers among minority youth
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By Shazwan Mustafa Kamal, Lisa J Ariffin and Lee Wei Lian

KUALA LUMPUR, Feb 16 — Young non-Malays in the country who feel discriminated against could present a challenge to the next political coalition to win the 13th general elections, according to a recent survey by The Malaysian Insider.

Non-Malay voters under 30 years of age who spoke to The Malaysian Insider expressed deep, at times visceral disappointment over what they say is racial discrimination, government-sanctioned or otherwise, some 55 years after the nation's independence.

This comes as a survey done by the Merdeka Center showed that the number of non-Malays who feel like second class citizens had increased since 2006.

A typical experience is that of Patrick Chay, 24, who works for a multinational company in the oil and gas industry.

Melissa Low: Feels overlooked because of her race. — Picture by Choo Choy May
Chay says he has seen how difficult it is for Chinese Malaysians to enter the industry due to barriers put up by "big brother".

"That's why forward-looking Chinese are going abroad," he said.

One such Chinese Malaysian is Melissa Low, 26, who left for Singapore after about a year working in a large audit firm in KL.

Low says that she felt disappointed when she was passed over for government scholarships despite getting better results than some who obtained scholarships but were from the Malay ethnic group.

She also felt that based on her experience working in KL, the practice of affirmative-action based on race had seeped into the corporate world, which meant that a person was less likely to be rewarded based on merit, which was a big turn-off for her.

Both Chay and Low said that while they had no problems mingling with Malays, they felt that non-Malays were being treated unfairly by the government.

For recent graduate Simitha T. Singam, 23, she says she does not feel very secure as a minority in Malaysia, rating her level of security only five out of 10.

"Because coming from a minority's point of view... the fact that I have to even label myself as such shows I'm still a second-class citizen despite being the third generation of my family that was born in Malaysia," she said.

Simitha: Hopes people will focus more on human rights rather than "my-race rights". —
Picture by Lisa J Ariffin

"My great-grandparents moved here way before Merdeka but I'm still a Sri Lankan Malaysian and not just a Malaysian. Hence, at anytime, I can be a nobody in this country."

For personal development coach-cum-actor Kris Law, who is in his late twenties, his experience with racial stereotyping and discrimination came as an ironic surprise given his inability to read Chinese.

Law says he could not get work in Chinese-language dramas and despite trying to break into Malay dramas, he would only be offered limited roles that he felt were stereotypes such as a Japanese soldier.

"I went to a government school and studied Malay and now I can't get good roles in Malay dramas," he said.

Kris: Non-Malay faces missing from mass media. — Picture courtesy of Kris Law
He felt that non-Malay faces were increasingly marginalised in the mass media, such as advertising billboards, and said he hoped that the government would take note.

"1 Malaysia is a good concept but it's not a reality, especially not in the media," he said.

Rachel Tan, 23, an accounts executive, says every race in the country should be treated fairly, and that current laws were biased against non-Muslims.

"Race issues in Malaysia are reflected even work-wise. When I meet clients from government agencies, there is an accepted stereotype that we have to send Malay-Muslim colleagues to meet them instead. It also affects how we view these agencies.

"I would like to see more non-Malays working in the government too, to combat the perception that it is racially dominated by one race," she added.

Lawyer Joshua Teh, 25, believes that many non-Muslims are feeling increasingly alienated following recent claims of Christians trying to convert Muslims.

"As a Christian, I find it offensive. I feel there is no avenue for me to speak freely to a Muslim about the faith.

"In Malaysia, it is really a case of Christians and Muslims trying to co-habitate."

Rachel: Feels current laws biased against non-Muslims — Picture courtesy of Rachel Tan
Thanks to affirmative action policies, Malays and other Bumiputeras are given privileges such as easier access to government contracts, funding, licences, scholarships, educational institutions and housing in an effort to narrow economic disparities between the racial groups.

Proponents of this approach, such as former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamed, maintain that without such aggressive affirmative action the country would descend into chaos.

Critics of the country's race-based policies however say that it has been hijacked and abused by an elite minority and was also damaging the country's competitiveness, with most recently University of Malaya Vice-Chancellor Tan Sri Dr Ghauth Jasmon being quoted in the Malay

Mail as saying that race quotas should end for the sake of education standards.

The Najib administration has apparently begun to address some of the weakness in the race-based approach, admitting that some of the past practices were too "blunt" to be effective.

More non-Malays feel like second-class citizens in 2011 than in 2006

The prime minister also introduced his hallmark 1 Malaysia campaign to unite the country although many maintain that the country is united by default and political parties are the source of problems.

While Barisan Nasional has tried to reach out to non-Malays, particularly with the prime minister adopting a more inclusive message, Pakatan Rakyat's de facto leader Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim has gone one step further and said that he would rid Malaysia of the "culture" of racial discrimination if he were in power.

Wan Saiful Wan Jan, chief executive of Institute of Democracy and Economic Affairs (IDEAS), said that the feelings of non-Malays was understandable but stressed that racial discrimination existed everywhere, even among the non-Malays.

"I don't blame non-Malays for feeling like this," he said. "This is what you get when you have a political system divided along ethnic lines."

He added that Malays too feel discriminated against when they see job advertisements seeking only Mandarin speakers or business associations formed by Chinese clans.

James Chin, a political science lecturer at Monash University said that for the Chinese Malaysians, the political framework was always one of marginalisation and feelings of being treated as second class.

Minority voters meanwhile are likely to carry their discontent with them to the polling booth.

Simitha says that her vision is one where Malaysians were not divided according to their race.

"I would like to see Malaysia as a single unit a not a compilation of one majority and various minorities," she said. "I hope for a country where people focused more on human rights rather than my-race-rights."

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