

Dr M doing BN more harm than good
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By RJ Rajah
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The former premier's comments on vernacular education has got the Indian and Chinese fuming.

Dr Mahathir Mohamad's critical comments on the existence of Tamil and Chinese schools in this country has drawn an unprecedented tirade against him from the Tamil media, with many Indian leaders firing salvos at the former premier for his unacceptable stand.

In a recent interview with Utusan Malaysia, Mahathir's comments suggested that vernacular schools should be abolished to have one single education system.

Everyone was surprised because during his tenure of 22 years as the premier of this country no one remembered such remarks coming from him. Knowing the political dangers of making such statements as a prime minister, Mahathir never seriously ventured into the arena of vernacular school education during his days.

Upon the publication of Mahathir's comments, the Tamil media went into a frenzy as many Indian NGOs and leaders lambasted Mahathir for his comments on removing Tamil schools as it would ultimately eradicate Tamil education in this country, a subject close to the hearts of Tamils who form the largest segment within the Indian community.

"A venom known as Mahathir" was the heading of the editorial serial of Tamil daily Thinakural written by the newspaper's editor BR Rajan. In a series of articles, Rajan outlined Mahathir's venomous attacks on minorities and their right to learn their mother tongues.

Other Tamil newspapers also carried similar statements attacking Mahathir.

Several Indian NGO leaders soon joined the fray in condemning Mahathir for making statements against minority races and vernacular education.

However, the senior MIC leaders carefully avoided a confrontation with Mahathir on this issue for reasons best known to them. MIC is also known for its continued battle for the betterment of Tamil schools and Tamil education.

Can BN repair the damage?

Mahathir is always seen as the voice of Umno and BN. Reports suggest that even Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak's actions are to some extent influenced by Mahathir's thinking.

Mahathir is going around the country whipping up support for Umno and BN with the 13th general election in his mind. He has even summoned government officers for his meetings with BN-Umno party leaders, but it remains to be seen whether his campaigns are in fact helping BN or pushing the minority votes away from BN, thereby further spoiling its chances of retaining Putrajaya.

Some of Mahathir's recent comments are causing colossal damage to BN's efforts in getting the crucial Chinese and Indians votes during the forthcoming general election.

The Chinese community is not pleased with his views on Chinese private schools and before their perceptions could be corrected by the BN government, Mahathir further

angered the Chinese community by criticising Najib for recognising educational certificates from Tunku Abdul Rahman (TAR) college, which is run by MCA.

While the Chinese community is upset with the comments from Mahathir, his Utusan interview has also clearly caused discontentment among the Indian community.

The Indian community is already upset and unhappy with Umno-BN for its actions against S Ambiga. Before the dust surrounding Ambiga's issues could settle, Mahathir's comments have caused further displeasure within the Indian community.

Mahathir's comments cannot be ignored just because it is not coming from a government minister of the day. He is still seen as part of the government, greatly influencing its affairs.

The Indian community, too, had a respectable view about Mahathir for his past contributions to the country but that seems to be shattered now in view of his comments on the Tamil schools.

Some segments of the Indian community still argue that Mahathir's racially inclined policies during his 22-year tenure as premier was one of the key factors that retarded the growth and progress of the Indian community and some single him out for the sorry state of the Indian community today.

Some firm and unwavering assurances from the prime minister or his deputy on vernacular education – which may be forthcoming – would be able to change the perceptions created by Mahathir on vernacular education in this country, but the damage has already been done as far as the Indian votes are concerned.

Only time would tell us whether the mighty BN machinery would be able to overcome and correct the damage.

RJ Rajah is an observer and writer on politics and social issues with a keen interest particularly in Malaysian Indian affairs.

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