



Speak not of the 'Indian voice' but of equal opportunity

While reflecting on historical injustice is vital to bring remedy to matters such as poverty, the question that should be asked is whether past approaches, terms and slogans are useful to the people we are trying to help.

Lately, an expert on poverty issues pointed out that Indian voices have been excluded in the development of the 12th Malaysia Plan.

"It is sad to note that there has been no major effort by Indian-based political parties and major Indian-based civil society organisations to host public discussions on the 12th Malaysia Plan," Denison Jayasooria, a sociologist and research fellow at University Kebangsaan Malaysia, said.

The 12th Malaysia Plan will be released in Parliament on 27 September.

The term "Indian voices" connotes an ethnic perspective that has not produced significant results over the years. The reason for the existence of race-based parties like Umno, the MCA and the MIC and the ethnically inspired individuals in the opposition party is that they want their racial voices to be heard and to derive some sort of political expediency and legitimacy among their communities.

It is sad an outfit such as the Malaysian Indian Transformation Unit (Mitra) under the national unity ministry, set up for the empowerment of the Indian community, had to be reminded to engage with the community at the state and district levels. This indicates a structural failure of past policies with regard to the Indian community.

In the opposition, there are some who criticise institutionalised racism in the government sector, while choosing to be silent about ethnic discrimination in the private sector. The reason is obvious: the bulk of their supporters are from the private sector.

The ethno-political manoeuvring over the decades has resulted in a conservative socioeconomic order and system, where the gap between the rich and the poor among all communities has widened. We have rich Malay and elites of other ethnic groups who have increased their wealth through connections and the game of ethnic politics. On the other hand, ordinary Malays, Chinese, Indians, Ibans and Kadazans have to endure high expenses from the monopoly over public goods and communication devices, the patronage system and ethnic discrimination at workplaces, a lack of public consultation on socioeconomic issues in local areas, and a polluted environment due to unbridled capitalism.

When we speak of the Indian voice, which category of people are we addressing? Is it the bottom 40% of households, the middle 40% or the top 20%? The term Indian is simplistic in the complex dynamism of the socioeconomic system.

The **Statistics Department's 2016 Household Income and Expenditure Survey** report mentioned that the majority of Chinese Malaysians were wage earners, accounting for 70% of the Chinese population, while 72% of the Malays were wage earners, with Indians at 83% – which showed that the relative percentages of all ethnic groups were comparable.

In its State of Households 2018 report, the research outfit of sovereign wealth fund Khazanah Nasional Bhd noted that the gap in the real average income between the top 20% of households, the middle 40% and the bottom 40% in Malaysia had almost doubled compared to two decades ago

Therefore, the gap between the rich and the poor is common among all ethnic groups, including between urban and rural areas. While there is no denying there are legitimate ethnic grievances due to discrimination, it is vital to address these issues in the broader dimension of the current political and economic system that is in place in the country.

What the nation really needs is solidarity among all ethnic groups to challenge a system that privileges the elites in the name of communal rights.

For example, we should push for an equal opportunity commission to address ethnic discrimination at workplaces and institutionalised racism.

We need an equitable social system that tackles the political, economic and social gaps between elite politicians and the people, the rich and the poor. We need to build an egalitarian society where power is diffused to reflect an equal society.

The Indian Malaysian community will surely benefit more from a just, decentralised socioeconomic system.

“The Indian voice” is an old paradigm that serves only conservative political purposes. It is neither evolutionary nor revolutionary. – The Malaysian Insight

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