

Malaysian-Indians: Rough Road to Equality?

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Malaysia goes for its 13 general elections on 5 May and the Indian community there finds itself at a crossroads. A description of the political evolution of the Malaysian Indian community and what the future holds for them.

As Malaysia's 13th general election, slated for 5 May 2013 draws closer, there are whispers that the country's small Indian community might once again -- as in the previous election held in 2008 -- be the "kingmakers" in the most closely fought election in this multi-racial country with a sizeable Malay Muslim majority.

In an uncharacteristic gamble during the last elections in 2008, Malaysian-Indians led by a relatively unknown group of lawyers calling themselves Hindu Rights Action Force or Hindraf, switched their traditional political loyalties from the 51-year ruling coalition, Barisan Nasional (BN) to the relatively untested Malaysian opposition Pakatan Rakyat (PR). Their action was a retaliation against the perceived failure of the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) - the only official Indian component in the BN - to actively advocate the socio-economic uplift of the Indian community with the government. The Hindraf leaders, with their cry of *Makkal Sakthi* (people's power), argued that their action was a long overdue response to the consistent failure of the MIC to fight robustly for the upliftment of Malaysian Indians since independence.

Constituting little more than 7% of the country's total population, Malaysia's minority Indians had never before been viewed as having much political clout, let alone such high visibility. (Since independence in 1957, Malaysians have been governed by a race-based tripartite coalition comprised of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the Malay(si)an Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malay(si)an Indian Congress (MIC) each with the mandate of taking care of its own race). This alliance, now known as the Barisan Nasional, was formed in 1955 to contest Malaysia's first general election, and has remained in power since. The subsequent electoral success of PR -- which denied a two-thirds majority to the BN in the federal government and secured an unprecedented five out of the 13 states -- could be credited largely to this "Hindraf effect" around which sections of other dissatisfied Malaysians of various races had rallied.

Poised on the brink of the 13th general election on 5th May, the perceived successes and failures of the two main players, the ruling BN and the opposition alliance, PR, during the intervening 5-year period since 2008 will be crucial in determining the electorate's choice of the next government. The intervening five years since 2008 has been a critical period for BN which, immediately after the results of the last election, embarked on a vigorous re-branding exercise to salvage its image before a politically maturing citizenry and thus regain its waning popularity. This period also saw a formidable increase in the power and popularity of the opposition led by the controversial yet charismatic ex-deputy prime minister, Anwar Ibrahim.

Against this politically volatile climate on the road to Putrajaya (the seat of Malaysian government) it may be worth asking what "Makkal Sakthi" has achieved for the Indian community post-2008. Most importantly, is the post-2008 increased political representation of Indians (in both the Federal and State governments) indicative of a growing recognition of their power as a community to influence the outcome of the forthcoming election?

Indians in Malay(si)a

To understand the present Indian dilemma a brief history of their arrival in the Malay Peninsula or Malaya (old name for Malaysia) is instructive and informative of their more than five decade long struggle to transcend the cycle of poverty, ignorance and underdevelopment in a complex plural society that is complicated even further by race-based politics.

Historically, people of different ethnicities from the subcontinent came to the Malay Peninsula for trade as early as 400 AD and eventually began settling there permanently. With the colonisation of the peninsula in the 18th Century, for economic expediency, the British imported labour for the Malayan plantations, mainly from Tamil Nadu. They also brought in smaller groups from Sri Lanka, Kerala and Andhra Pradesh to take up supervisory posts in the estates and as railway clerks, because they were English educated.

Based primarily in the plantations since colonial times, with the exception of a small middle class, the Indians have been plagued by poverty, lack of access to education, displacement from plantations to urban areas, statelessness (many plantation workers did not register their children at birth mainly due to ignorance) and unequal distribution of wealth in a country that is rapidly moving from an agriculture-based to a manufacturing and knowledge-based economy. Though the Indian community was markedly heterogeneous in respect of class, ethnicity, language, culture, and religion, over time the term "Indian" became conflated with "Tamil" in Malaysia, a misconception that exists till today and is responsible for the continued fragmentation of Indians of different ethnicities. Moreover, the MIC's almost exclusive representation of Tamil Indians has left the other Indian communities with minimal political representation. This may be one of the reasons why despite MIC, the Indians do not form a united force in the political arena.

The Hindraf Aftermath

In the immediate aftermath of the 2008 elections, having lost five crucial states to the opposition, the government clamped down on Hindraf and its activities, banning the movement which it felt was responsible for this unprecedented electoral debacle. Under siege by the government, the movement became increasingly fragmented with its leadership falling into disarray. Having only just shifted their allegiance from MIC, the Indians once again were faced with the dilemma of which party could now effectively and adequately represent their interests.

The *Pakatan Rakyat* (PR), true to its election promise to its large support-base of disgruntled Indians, appointed a few ethnic Indians to important positions in the opposition-held state governments. But soon after, the PR was constrained to focus on the more pressing task of consolidating its hard-won electoral gains. Moreover, the PR saw itself as a multiracial coalition, and critical of BN's race-based politics, it espoused the development of the Indians within the framework of PR's manifesto which promoted equal rights and opportunities for all Malaysians irrespective of race.

As a result, one of the more prominent Hindraf factions, the Human Rights Party opted to field its own candidates in the forthcoming 13th general election as it felt neither BN nor PR were capable of effectively espousing the Indian cause. Another prominent Hindraf faction - retaining the old name of Hindraf - recently signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with the BN and urged the Indians to return their loyalty to the ruling coalition on 5 May. The MIC, on the other hand, has been trying to win back the Indian vote, which, despite its small numbers, is tipped to be crucial as the election is expected to be very closely contested. Confusing the issues further, other sections of Indians, mostly urban and young, have embraced the ideology of multiculturalism espoused by PR. The politically ambitious among them have emerged as important leaders of the opposition at this critical juncture. Thus, as things stand today, Indians appear to be considerably more divided than they ever were before 2008.

Whither Malaysian Indians?

In spite of their internal divisions, in the run-up to the 13th general elections it is not surprising that Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak has been assiduously courting the Indian vote which has again become significant at a time when the Prime Minister's popularity has reportedly slipped. According to a survey by the Centre for Democracy and Elections 43% of respondents believed that Anwar was qualified to be prime minister, compared to 39% percent saying the same for Najib. Skeptics, however, doubt the ability of a minority group to make much of a dent in the vote.

In his attempt to appease the Indian community, the prime minister, in a series of tactical manoeuvres lifted the more than four-year old ban on the Hindraf on the eve of Thaipusam (a Hindu religious festival) in January 2013. And as mentioned earlier, on 19 April, 2013, BN

achieved a minor political victory when it signed the MoU with P Wayathamoorthy, leader of one of the fragmented factions of Hindraf. This incurred the wrath of several other Indian leaders who regarded the MoU as a “compromise” with the ruling BN. Hindraf’s fall from grace is even more poignant as their blue-print only highlighted a six-point demand to the prime minister compared to its original 18-point blue-print. The six key points only highlighted issues related to displaced Indian plantation workers, tertiary level education for Indian students, job opportunities in the government sector, financial loans to Indian entrepreneurs, and the establishment of a Minorities Affairs Ministry.

Most significantly, Hindraf appears to have abandoned its most vital demands, among others, of equal rights, justice for all, and the removal of various controversial articles in the federal constitution which they saw as a hindrance to the achievement of equality and nation-hood espoused in several national policies implemented since the 1970s. In defence of P Wayathamoorthy’s action, there are those who argue that the MoU was merely “a means towards an end” in order to fight for Indian rights from within the coalition since they had failed to do so staying outside the BN. Many political leaders have even lauded the prime minister’s attempts to be more inclusive and conciliatory, citing the release of a few of the Hindraf detainees under the now repealed Internal Security Act as one of the instances of BN’s seriousness in mending relations with the Indian community. In the final analysis, the critical question is will BN deliver on its promises under the MoU if it wins in the upcoming general election. As some critics have argued, the promises made under the pact with a caretaker government are not binding and there is no guarantee that they will be kept even if BN wins.

The way forward

In the ultimate analysis and looking at the bigger picture post-2008, trends in the various opposition parties reflect a shift away from purely race-based parties. Certainly this is a reflection of increased democratisation of the Malaysian political space. At the same time, the salience of race still continues to plague the Malaysian mind-set and politics. Malaysians must make a quantum leap, coupled with huge political will, to discard age-old practices which stand in the way of good governance and progress. As for the future of the Indians, with no dedicated party to advocate their ethnic cause, other than the MIC, the way forward still remains unclear. The PR, on its part though, is still committed to the upliftment of Indians as part of its overarching agenda of providing solace to all needy Malaysians notwithstanding race.

Regardless of which coalition comes to power on 5 May, an emphasis on education, skills development, and opportunities for income-generation for all depressed communities, including the Indians, must be a policy priority. A crucial change would come with the emergence of moderate grassroots-based leaders from within the community itself, working with the government to bring about concrete reforms for the realisation of the aspirations of this community. Successful business leaders, intellectuals and other achievers within the

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community too are sorely needed to become role-models for the younger generation. A partnership between the government, private enterprises and non-governmental organisations to fund professionally managed developmental projects with clear road-maps, both in the short and long run, could be a way forward. Identifying the various socio-economic groups within the community and providing them with specific directions like employment with the government, alternate sources of income, or combining a job with part-time entrepreneurship and above all, skills based training would then have to begin with a sense of urgency.

Politicians, however, can do only so much for the community. Meaningful initiative has to emerge from within the heart of the community itself for the transformation to be sustaining. Until that happens the Indians may well remain standing at the cross-roads.