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Marginalisation and the Indian Community in Malaysia

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The recent demonstrations held by the Hindu community in Malaysia came as a shock for many in Malaysia and beyond. Such a large-scale demonstration held by an ethnic group has not occurred since the 1969 riot, yet, it is not surprising.

EARLIER THIS year, prominent Malaysian historian Prof Khoo Kay Kim noted that the state of inter-ethnic ties in Malaysia was at its worst since 1957. This was due mainly to what he deemed as the worsening transgression of the rights of minorities in Malaysia over the years. The demonstration held by the Hindu Rights Action Force (HINDRAF), an NGO formed to protect the rights of Hindus in Malaysia, is a reflection of the frustrations felt by the Hindu community. Several factors such as religious and political discriminations can explain the recent demonstration.

Discrimination of Indians in Malaysia

The main motive for the actions of the Hindu community is the growing transgression of their rights in Malaysia. The *bumiputra* policy aimed at rectifying the economic disparity between the Malay community and the other communities has led to the economic marginalisation of the Indian community in Malaysia. In the recent Ninth Malaysian Plan report, it was highlighted that Indians control only 1.2% of the corporate wealth in Malaysia, a decline from the 1.5% that they controlled previously. In more recent years, lower income Indians have started to move away from the traditional jobs of rubber tapping to the urban areas to seek jobs. This in part is due to the fact that many rubber and oil palm plantations around big cities are being used for commercial and residential purposes. Their educational level coupled with the *bumiputra* policies, which limit the number of jobs available to them, have led many Indian youths to resort to illegal activities to sustain themselves. The phenomenon of the Indian urban poor is clearly reflected by the fact that as many as 21.7% of Indians in Selangor, a largely urban state, reside in squatters.

Islamisation and Curbing Non-Muslim Rights

Another issue that has incensed the Hindu community in Malaysia is the curbing of their religious rights. Since the introduction of Islam Hadhari as a guiding principle of the Malaysian state, government officials in various departments and ministries have utilised Islam Hadhari not only to further Islamise Malaysian society but to curb the rights of non-Muslims. This trend began with the case of a former Malaysian commando, M. Moorthy whom a state religious authority said had converted to Islam before he died in 2005 and was given a Muslim burial despite his wife disputing this. This was followed by several cases of Muslim women married to Hindu men who were separated from their husbands against their will. Beyond these controversial cases, the Malaysian authorities in

various places including in Klang, Selangor, demolished many Hindu temples which were built illegally on government lands.

But the lack of sensitivity on the part of the Malaysian authorities in dealing with such religious issues have led to massive outcries from the Malaysian Hindu community. The attitude of government officials, many of whom are Muslims, is reflective of a new sense of religious superiority that many Malaysian Muslims feel. These Muslims feel that with the introduction of Islam Hadhari as a new model of development for Malaysia, the position of Islam has been elevated and many feel little need to show respect for other religious groups.

A prominent religious scholar linked to the Malaysian government that the author spoke to at the height of the Moorthy case reflected this attitude when he said that the court verdict on the issue was a fair one as the rights of Muslims should supersede the rights of others. It is indeed ironic that the Islam Hadhari model proposed by the government of Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi supposedly as a new model of development for the Muslim World based on moderate Islam has led to the curbing of non-Muslim rights in Malaysia. This is especially worse for the Hindu community which is viewed to be a weaker group whose rights could be more easily transgressed vis-à-vis that of the richer ethnic Chinese community.

Indian Leadership Problem

Another factor that had sparked the demonstrations is the problem related to Indian leadership in Malaysia. The leader of the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), the party representing the Indian community in Malaysia, Datuk Seri Samy Vellu, did not seem bothered by these developments, dismissing the organisers of the Hindraf demonstration as tools of the Malaysian opposition. However, the problem seems to be with the leadership of Samy Vellu himself. Despite being at the helm of Indian leadership in Malaysia and being the only Indian cabinet minister for the last 29 years, he has done little to uplift the Malaysian Indian community. The corporate wealth of the Indian community has shrunk and the community's educational standard seems to have worsened. Samy Vellu also seems to have little influence in the government and was not able to push it to act on issues related to the alleged transgression of Indian rights in Malaysia. Samy Vellu has also concentrated all powers within the community in himself.

Political Impact on the Malaysian Government

The main question for many analysts is how much the demonstration will affect the results of the next general elections, which is widely speculated to be held early next year. This is especially since the latest demonstration happened soon after the demonstrations held by Bersih, a coalition of political parties and NGOs calling for fair and free elections to be held in Malaysia. The Abdullah government does not seem bothered by the latest incident either. Instead of addressing the issues raised by Hindraf, Badawi threatened to use the Internal Security Act (ISA) to deal with future demonstrations. This is surprising given that in the 2004 elections, the Indian community gave strong support to the Barisan Nasional government.

Candidates from the MIC secured an average of 62% of the votes in the seats they contested. Indian support for the Barisan was also crucial in ensuring their victory during the Ijok by-election held earlier this year. However, a closer analysis of the Malaysian political scene may explain the nonchalant attitude of the Malaysian leadership. The Ijok by-election was held just after the demolition of several temples built illegally on state land and at the height of various issues related to the curbing of non-Muslim rights in Malaysia. In spite of this the Indian community in the constituency gave full support to the candidate from the Barisan. Thus, the Malaysian government does not see the need to address the concerns of the Indian community. The issue is whether the Indian community in Malaysia will translate their frustrations against the government into votes for the

opposition in the coming elections.

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