

We will never have needs-based affirmative action in Malaysia

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COMMENT | **PKR president Anwar Ibrahim's comments on his commitment to [needs-based affirmative action policies](#) instead of the race-based ones in place are problematic for a variety of reasons.**

"You cannot swim for new horizons until you have courage to lose sight of the shore." - William Faulkner

All of us, and by us I mean mainly the non-Malays, have heard this story in various incarnations before. I give Anwar credit for saying it, but the reality is that on issues such as this, there is a chasm of difference between saying and doing.

It also points, I suppose, to the different ways in which political operatives like Anwar and Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad play to their bases.

In addition, it exposes a kind of shadow play in the delivery of Anwar's comments. He said that when he is the prime minister he will speed up the process.

Really? If this is a priority for Pakatan Harapan and indeed the current prime minister, why is the process stalled, and more importantly, why isn't Mahathir leading the charge to speed up the process?

While Anwar says something like this, Mahathir, who acknowledges that Bersatu is a [racist party](#), claims that this particular form of racism is not "against other parties that are not race-based, such as fellow Pakatan Harapan component members PKR, Amanah and DAP."

This is somewhat dumb if you really think about it.

Why? Because while Anwar at least has the cover of a multiracial party, Mahathir's Bersatu has no choice but to be the champion of Malay rights and privileges, because it has to live up to the obligation placed on it by the non-Malay power brokers in Harapan in securing the Malay vote.

The issue here is not how either of these political operatives play to their bases, but rather how there really isn't very much difference in their ideological stances. I will give you an example.

Anwar uses the old canard of involving the "private sector" when it comes to resolving this issue: "...I also told the Chinese conglomerate that attended today's event that if they do not want race-based policies, they should do more."

Keep in mind the "private sector" is code for the Chinese community. Part of the Malay agenda strategy is to conflate the plutocrat class and the Chinese community.

And just last year, Mahathir, in discussing race-based policies, said that more scholarships need to be given to Malays since the Chinese “[are largely in business](#).” And in business, he added, “you can make tons of money.”

Reinforcing the narrative

What does this do? It reinforces a standard Malay political and racial narrative that pits one community against another. It misrepresents the historic and economic realities of the Chinese community as one that is a threat to the Malays.

It wrongly places a burden on the Chinese (conflating the community with the plutocrat class) to correct the economic and social disparities of the Malay community, which has everything to do with the race-based policies in place.

Is there discrimination in the private sector? Yes, there is. Should it be ignored? No, it should not, but conflating it with the institutionalised public discrimination and race-based, agenda-driven policymaking is one of the reasons why needs-based affirmative action policies will never see the light of day.

Let us be very clear. If Harapan were committed to needs-based policies, they would embark on it without hesitation.

The irony for Malay political operatives, of course, who always link the public and private sectors when it comes to race-based discourse, is that if they implemented something like the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, for instance, they would be killing two birds with one stone when it comes to discrimination in the public and private sectors.

What happened with the [Icerd debacle](#) is further evidence as to why there will never be needs-based affirmative action policies in Malaysia. Part of this is due to the urban elites that Anwar seems to have a problem with, and which has become part of the racial discourse.

Indeed I took a swipe at Chandra Muzzafer [here](#) – “It also places the non-Malay intelligentsia as part of the problem, which mainstream Malay politics routinely does, instead of part of the solution in dismantling a compromised system.

“While there is some truth in that, it is pointless asking everyone to come together on an issue which is fundamentally about the rights of everyone versus the privileges that come with being in the majority.”

Part of this is also the unacknowledged hostility and racism that Malaysians engage in.

When it came to the Icerd issue, this was [on full display](#) – “Of course, people are blind to some things in this country or worse, do not really care. This idea that the state was racist, which created a separate space for the non-Malays to compete, live and die in, has resulted in a discourse which not only alienates people but also encourages a siege mentality in the non-Malay community.”

Look, back in the day, Wan Saiful Wan Jan argued that affirmative action is morally wrong in two essays that have since been taken down.

He also made the claim that arguments against affirmative action could only be made by Malays because of the political realities of this country. Interested readers can read excerpts of it [here](#).

Since joining Bersatu, he has apparently changed his mind. And this is really the problem. Nobody

really wants to have needs-based policies.

Malay and non-Malay political operatives do not want to risk their grip on power, because it is one thing talking about needs-based policies, and another implementing it. Political operatives know this.

They get away with this because they know that the Harapan base will be pragmatic and not demand needs-based policies, because they do not want a return of Umno-BN – which is somewhat hilarious seeing how things are playing out in Harapan now.

Needs-based policies will always remain a pipe dream.

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