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Malaysia's 'Interlok' Issue: Communal Sensitivities & the Next Elections

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Synopsis

As the next general election looms in Malaysia, political groups seem to be pressing their demands on the Najib administration. Increasingly the demands from the various communities seem to be sectarian in nature. The controversy over the novel 'Interlok' is one of them.

Commentary

THE CONTROVERSY over a textbook deemed insensitive by the Malaysian Indian community began when ethnic leaders publicly complained about the novel *Interlok*. Written by national laureate Datuk Abdullah Hussein, it has been used as a standard textbook in many Malaysian national schools. Although the novel has been around for many years, controversy surrounding it was stirred at the end of last year over the use of the word 'pariah' describing some of the Indian characters in the novel.

The novel itself has been described as a work that looks at inter-ethnic relations in Malaysia during and after the colonial period. It features representative characters from the major ethnic groups in the country. Critics however argue that the novel is unsuitable for learning purposes as it reiterates the view that Malaysians of Indian and Chinese origin are 'foreigners' who have come to settle in the country and who are cast in a negative light compared to the other characters.

Background to controversy

As soon as the controversy flared, almost all of the ethnic-based parties were forced to take a stand. The Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) party called for the novel to be withdrawn, while opposition parties have also called for its removal from the syllabus. The Democratic Action Party's Liew Chin Tong noted: "The DAP's stand is that the book should be withdrawn from the required reading list.", Hatta Ramli from the Malaysian Islamic Party PAS noted that "PAS does not regard *Interlok* as a 'must-read' for Malaysian citizens" and that there ought to be "efforts to remove all perceived sensitive content" from the novel.

The most vocal and persistent group behind the anti-*Interlok* movement however has been the Human Rights Party (HRP) led by P. Uthayakumar, S. Jayathas and others who were among those who had set up and led the Malaysian Hindu Rights Action Force (Hindraf). This is a Hindu-based movement whose protests against the previous government under Abdullah Badawi were said to be a major factor that accounted for the swing of Malaysian Indian votes away from the government at the 2008 elections.

What began as a small controversy has now become a national issue as it strikes at the heart of inter-ethnic relations in the country. Furthermore speculation is rife that the next general election will be held between the last quarter of 2011 to the first half of 2012, and the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition under Prime Minister Najib is hard pressed to win back the Malaysian Indian and Chinese voters. He needed their support to reclaim the two-thirds majority in Parliament that was lost in the 2008 elections. So great is the worry of the potential loss of the Indian votes that the government was forced to set up a consultation panel with a promise that the offensive passages in the book would be removed to accommodate the sensibilities of Malaysian Indian readers.

More communal issues to come?

The most recent demonstration by the Human Rights Party took place on 27 February 2011, leading to the arrest of Uthayakumar and more than a hundred of its members. According to one of those arrested, “the (Malaysian) police did something unexpected: they gave us food and were kind towards those who they arrested. But no-one (among those arrested) touched the food they gave us and we will struggle on”.

Reaction to the HRP-planned demonstration was mixed on both sides: BN leaders claimed that the turn-out at the demonstration was much lower than the organisers had claimed. The BN leaders suggested that this was a positive indication of how the Najib administration has managed to regain the confidence and support of the Malaysian Indian community. Meanwhile leaders of the opposition Pakatan Rakyat were likewise muted in their support for the demonstration, with only one DAP leader – K. Manoharan – showing up to demonstrate support for the protesters.

Though the demonstration on 27 February did not result in a mass protest of several thousands as the organisers had promised, the soft treatment of the detainees – all of whom were released on the same day – suggests that the Najib administration is keen to preserve some of the goodwill it has managed to gain from the Malaysian Indian electorate. The demonstration organised by the HRP and former leaders of Hindraf also suggests that the issues raised by leaders of the Indian community are not about to go away in the lead-up to the coming general election. The election campaign is likely to see many more ethnic and religious-based issues brought to the fore.

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