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THE HINDRAF MOVEMENT IN MALAYSIA Indians' discontent has been boiling for a while

On Nov 25, 30,000 Malaysian Indians took part in a protest organised by the Hindu Rights Action Force (Hindraf). This mass mobilisation of a community that has traditionally supported the government took many observers by surprise. Why did they march and what were their grievances?

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The Straits Times
Dec 31, 2007

THE discontent of Malaysian Indians dates back to their migration to urban areas. During the colonial era, Indians were concentrated mainly in plantations in the west coast states of peninsular Malaysia. But after independence, many plantations were sold and the Indian workers had no choice but to migrate to urban areas.

Rural to urban migration intensified under the New Economic Policy (NEP) and the resulting vacuum in rural areas was filled by foreign labour, mainly from Indonesia.

As more and more Indians became urbanised, they began to experience various economic, social and cultural problems, including economic deprivation and a serious lack of proper housing.

The government, however, with its focus on addressing Malay grievances and implementing mega projects, did not have time for Indians. The latter therefore almost invariably ended up as squatters on state or private land in and around major urban centres.

The MIC's failure

THE Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition government left the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) and its leader, Datuk S. Samy Vellu, to address these problems. But the MIC had neither resources nor political power. Since Malay voters were largely responsible for

ensuring the success of MIC candidates during general elections, the MIC leadership was very dependent on Umno.

The MIC also failed to distribute fairly the limited resources it was allocated. In the early 1980s, for example, Telekom shares given to the party's investment arm, Maika Holdings, were diverted to three companies, without benefiting the Indian community. The MIC's allocation of low-cost housing, obtained by virtue of its status as a BN component party, also suffered from the perception that this largesse was not distributed in a fair and transparent way.

Islamisation

AFTER 1980, the government's emphasis on Islamisation alienated Hindu Indians. Former prime minister Mahathir Mohamad's earlier assertion that Malaysia was an Islamic country stunned the non-Muslim communities. And Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak's more recent affirmation of Malaysia as an Islamic state has only fuelled these fears.

Hindu Indians have been the most hit by the onset of Islamisation. Since many Hindu temples have not been properly registered or have failed to obtain registration, they have become the targets of the state and local authorities.

Several temples, many of them more than 50 years old, have been demolished on these grounds, with most demolitions taking place in Selangor and, more specifically, in the vicinity of the state capital of Shah Alam.

Rumours persist that there is an unwritten policy to turn Shah Alam into an Islamic city. As such, it is widely believed that there have been deliberate attempts to 'cleanse' the city and its surroundings of non-Muslim places of worship. The Hindraf march on Nov 25 - only a few days before Deepavali - was triggered by the demolition of a 70-year-old Hindu temple in Kampung Jawa, Shah Alam.

In fact, insensitive temple demolition, rather than economic deprivation, seems to be at the heart of Indian anger. Before the Kampung Jawa temple demolition, state officials tore down some historic temples in Selangor, Kedah, Perak, Negeri Sembilan and Malacca - all states with large Indian-Hindu concentrations. Such incidents have convinced many Indians that the Malay-Muslim elite wants to rid the country of places of non-Muslim worship.

Syariah law

ONE very disturbing aspect of Islamisation in Malaysia is the slow but steady intrusion of syariah (Islamic) law into the lives of non-Muslims. Various actions by Muslim bureaucrats, as well as syariah court decisions, have infringed upon the rights of non-Muslims.

In 2003, when Hindu mother S. Shamala sought to challenge the conversion of her two sons to Islam by her estranged husband, the civil courts declined to rule, saying instead that the Syariah Court was the proper forum.

And in 2005, the Islamic Affairs Department decided on a Muslim burial for Mr Moorthy Maniam despite protests from his wife, Madam S. Kaliasammal, that he was a practising Hindu. The department claimed that he had converted to Islam. When the matter was brought before a civil court, it said it had no jurisdiction and that the Syariah Court should decide.

Economic deprivation

WHEN Indians moved from plantations to urban areas, they had to compete with Malays. Given the government's policy of favouring Malays, most skilled jobs were beyond the grasp of Indians. Today, Indian employment in the public sector is about 3 per cent, with most employed at the lower levels.

The private sector is not much kinder. Since licences to open businesses require adherence to the NEP, many Indians are not in a position to engage in legitimate businesses. Many end up taking sub-contracts with reduced profit margins. Indians even find it hard to obtain licences to collect rubbish as these permits are meant for Malays. Given this squeeze, many Indians turn to menial jobs. Others resort to crime and other anti-social activities. Meanwhile, conflict over access to scarce resources also often leads to fratricidal violence in the community.

Violence

IN THE 1990s and 2000s, the mainstream media began to imply that Indians had a 'cultural' disposition towards crime and drug abuse. Although recent studies suggest the crime rate among Indians is not as alarming as it is made out to be, security agencies like the police think differently. Given this perception, it is not surprising that many Indians are detained for suspected 'involvement' in crime.

In the Simpang Rengam detention centre, for example, about 60 per cent of the detainees are Indians. In recent years, many Indian youths have been shot dead for their alleged involvement in armed robberies and kidnappings.

Racial attacks

IN 2001, a group of Malay-Muslims attacked and killed six ethnic Indians without provocation. The incident took place in Kampung Medan, a suburb of Petaling Jaya. In the ensuing violence, many Indians were injured, some requiring months of hospitalisation. After the incident, many Indian organisations demanded that the government set up a royal commission to investigate. But to date, the government has not responded.

Since then, groups like Hindraf have begun to use more radical language to draw the attention of the government to the community's plight. It was in this context that Hindraf leaders spoke of 'ethnic cleansing' and the 'mini-genocide' of Indians.

The police had strict orders to stop the Nov 25 Hindraf rally. In the early hours of the morning, police surrounded the grounds of the Batu Caves temple, ordering those gathered to disperse. As the situation grew tense, the police used tear gas and water cannon to disperse the crowd.

Meanwhile, several buses carrying Indian demonstrators to Kuala Lumpur were forced to turn back. Police also arrested a number of demonstrators and later charged 31 people, many of them innocent bystanders, with the attempted murder of a policeman.

Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi was incensed that Hindraf leaders used extreme language to characterise the plight of Indians. He warned the protesters that he would not hesitate to arrest them under the Internal Security Act (ISA), which provides for detention without trial.

However, the Prime Minister probably did not realise the extent to which the tough measures used by the police had gained international attention. The use of tear gas and water cannon against innocent bystanders in particular was noted by countries such as India, United Kingdom and the United States.

The harsh police action also prompted Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to say he was concerned about the incident because Indians were involved. International human rights organisations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International urged the government to allow freedom of assembly and not to invoke the ISA.

But the government feared further protests, not only by Hindraf but also by Bersih, a coalition of almost 70 civil society groups and opposition political parties.

On Dec 13, Hindraf leaders P. Uthayakumar, M.Manoharan, R.Genghadharan, V.Ganabathirau and T.Vasanthkumar were arrested and sent to the detention camp at Kamunting, Perak.

Prime Minister Abdullah's uncharacteristic remarks about invoking the ISA stunned many observers. Other senior Umno leaders made similar statements. The Minister in the Prime Minister's Department, Mohd Nazri bin Abdul Aziz, told other countries not to 'butt' into the internal affairs of Malaysia.

Datuk Seri Najib's statement that the government would have to take stern action against Hindraf leaders in order to placate Malay anger also had racial overtones.

These statements gave the impression that a Malay-dominated government was prosecuting a Hindu-Indian group. Rumours of Hindraf supporters marching into

Kampung Baru (a Malay enclave) and of a planned rally by a Malay communal organisation called Pekeda were whispered.

In an apparent attempt to cool tempers in the wake of the arrests, Datuk Seri Abdullah met a number of Indian community leaders together with Datuk Samy Vellu in Putra Jaya. The Attorney-General withdrew the attempted murder charges against the 31 detainees. Instead, 25 of them were charged with illegal assembly and six were freed.

At the meeting, the Prime Minister called for a frank dialogue. Mr A.Vaithilingam, president of the Malaysian Hindu Sangam, and Mr P.Sivakumar of the Malaysian Indian Business Association spoke candidly. While Mr Vaithilingam spoke of temple demolitions and the impact of syariah law, Mr Sivakumar outlined the economic deprivation of Indians.

In contrast, Datuk Samy Vellu and the MIC downplayed the Hindraf incident. Lately, the MIC leader has been requesting a 'little help' from the government for Indians. MIC's former deputy president, Datuk S. Subramaniam, has even supported the arrest of Hindraf leaders.

The fallout

THE Hindraf protest has damaged Malaysia's tolerant image. Prime Minister Abdullah's Islam Hadhari as a balanced and moderate form of Islam also seems to have taken a back seat to more dogmatic forms of the religion.

The rally has also challenged the authority and popularity of the Premier. On the advice of some hawkish Umno leaders, he has sought to re-assert his authority, in the process jettisoning his reputation for tolerance and fair-mindedness.

In the 2004 general election, the Prime Minister's popularity and promises to crack down on corruption won him an overwhelming mandate. But his recent crackdown on the Hindraf rally has shown that he is not averse to using harsh methods.

There seems to be general consensus among Malaysians - particularly Indians - that Datuk Samy Vellu's influence has also been weakened. Some members of Indian political parties aligned to the BN have asked the MIC leader to account for allocations that the party had received from the government. The president of the Peoples' Progressive Party recently faulted the MIC leadership for the neglect of the Indians.

Undaunted by the Hindraf incident, Datuk Samy Vellu continues to portray himself as a key leader. In a Dec 24 statement to the press, he said he had been tasked to monitor all Hindu temples in the country. He also said the MIC would go on the offensive to show that it had helped the Malaysian Indian community in various ways.

Some might regard Hindraf as an extreme organisation. But others are of the opinion that if not for the actions of Hindraf, Indian issues would not have received national attention.

The Malaysian government will be closely watched by the international community as it seeks to address the issues raised by Hindraf.

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