The New Economic Policy in Malaysia

Affirmative Action, Ethnic Inequalities and Social Justice

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CHAPTER 9

Left Behind: The Orang Asli under the New Economic Policy

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Introduction

This chapter examines the socioeconomic status of the Orang Asli under the New Economic Policy (NEP). A review of the data shows that the Orang Asli as a whole have largely been left behind, despite the NEP’s official focus on uplifting ‘the Malays and other indigenous peoples’. The second part focuses on the reasons why the Orang Asli have been left out of the equation. Finally, the discussion suggests that even though the NEP has failed to deliver the Orang Asli out of poverty, there may still be a need for affirmative action for this community as a remedial measure to correct the long history of marginalisation and discrimination.

As is well known, there were two main facets of the NEP. The first objective aimed to reduce and eventually eradicate poverty by raising income levels and increasing the employment opportunities of all Malaysians, irrespective of race. The second goal sought to accelerate the process of restructuring society by eliminating the identification of race with economic function (Malaysia 1971: 1). There was a particular emphasis on ‘Malay and other indigenous peoples’ so that they would ‘become full partners in all aspects of the economic life of the nation’ (Ibid.). Many are now calling for the abolition of the NEP and its various successor and related strategies. Their argument is that the NEP started with noble objectives but has overstacked its purpose and has been misused for political gains. An alternative approach to poverty alleviation is proposed, one that is not group based but rather based on needs and merit. Proponents argue that a needs-
based approach will still address the problem of Bumiputra inequality, as those who are in need will be in the target group. There is much merit to this push for a race-blind policy. However, we also need to consider how such measures might impact on a historically marginalised group like the Orang Asli.

The NEP was, to a certain extent, able to address wealth inequalities between the Bumiputera and non-Bumiputera groups in society. While the social indicators for Bumiputeras show positive development that may be correlated to the NEP’s goals, a close look at the statistics indicates that there are high levels of intragroup inequality with respect to the Orang Asli. The Orang Asli, though officially included in the Bumiputera category, have largely been left out from the NEP initiatives which have primarily targeted the Malays. What this review shows is that a group-based (or horizontal) approach in addressing inequality has a homogenising effect. In the case of the Orang Asli, when they are subsumed under the category Bumiputera, significant information on economic inequality is lost. What is especially important is the non-delivery and misappropriation of the goods and services that were designated for this community.

Looking at the current condition of the Orang Asli a number of important questions come to mind. How do we address the dire economic inequality experienced by this community and the denial of their rights to self-determination? Would a universalist approach be able to address their needs that have been systematically marginalised over time? Would removing affirmative action solve the problem? Would a needs-based or meritocratic approach be able to solve their problems? I would argue that there is still a need for some form of affirmative action for the Orang Asli community, in particular with regards to education and land rights. These affirmative measures should not be permanent but be able to redress past wrongs and allow for the creation of a level playing field. This would not be incompatible with a needs-based or universalist policy and could be carried out in tandem with the latter. As Will Kymlicka (1995: 6) argues, ‘[a] comprehensive theory of justice in a multicultural state will include both universal rights, assigned to individual regardless of group membership, and certain group-differentiated rights or “special status” for minority cultures. For indigenous peoples, this should include their rights to traditional territories, cultural rights to pursue their desired way of life, recognition of customary law and rights to self-determination (Ibid.: 24). It is only by recognising both the indigenous rights and citizenship rights of the Orang Asli that their needs as a community and as citizens can be adequately addressed.

Who Are the Orang Asli?

The term Orang Asli translates as ‘original people’, and is an umbrella administrative category that includes 18 ethnic subgroups of indigenous peoples in peninsular Malaysia. These subgroups can be categorised into three larger groupings which loosely map onto language groupings – Semang (Negrito), Senoi and Melayu Asli. According to the Department of Orang Asli Affairs’ most recent statistics the Orang Asli population stood at 158,000 in 2008, comprising 0.5 per cent of the total Malaysian population. The term Orang Asli started to be used officially only in the 1960s. Prior to this, they were referred to as Aborigines, and as Sakai, Biduanda, jacoen and other terms. The term Sakai was often mentioned in the colonial records but is now considered derogatory. Moreover, while several decades ago the different groups identified themselves according to their individual subethnic groups or their place-based groupings, the identity ‘Orang Asli’ has taken on a stronger meaning in recent years. Shared experiences – including challenges and to some extent because of the existence of the Department of Orang Asli Affairs – have forged a pan-Orang Asli ethnic identity and many now do identify themselves as ‘Asli’. There also exists the Persatuan Orang Asli se-Malaysia (POASM, the Orang Asli Association of Malaysia), which represents the community and advocates Orang Asli rights at the national level. Meanwhile, the Jaringan Kampung Orang Asli (Orang Asli Village Network) actively advocates Orang Asli rights at the grassroots level.

The Orang Asli groups traditionally practised swidden cultivation, as well as hunting and gathering. However, these days many more are sedentary farmers and grow cash crops such as oil palm and rubber. Some 85.7 per cent of Orang Asli live in rural areas, 11.3 per cent in urban areas and 3 per cent in small towns (Department of Statistics, Malaysia 2008). Only a small percentage of Orang Asli, such as the Batek in Taman Negara, are semi-nomadic and still pursue hunter-gatherer. Nevertheless, the forest remains an important resource for the community and some 40 per cent live close to forest areas and are still dependent on the forest for their livelihood. Many Orang Asli can be described as agro-foresters, cultivating fruit trees and other useful forest plants such as rattan. The forest, however, is more than just a source of economic needs. It serves an important spiritual function in their lives and is an important part of their identity as indigenous peoples.

The Orang Asli population is spread throughout peninsular Malaysia, with the exception of Perlis and Penang. The Semai and Temiar are located in Perak while the Temuan are the dominant group in Selangor and Negeri Sembilan. The highest concentrations of Orang Asli are in Perak and Pahang.