



Federalism going down the toilet

Is this what Malaysia's history of centralism has led to?

Something that Malaysians have had to realise in recent months is that political power in the country has over the years become so centralised that local governance is in real danger of disappearing altogether.

Even the collection of solid waste — something one would think is best managed at the local level — is now under the control of the federal government.

Centralism, by its very nature, distances power from the people. In the process, it increasingly brings benefits to those with ties to the central government.

One could in fact argue that the voter revolt against the Barisan Nasional in 2008 was a collective rejection of the ills of political centralism, and that it intuitively sought to force that unhealthy situation to the surface.

That, it has succeeded in doing.

After the egalitarian Malayan Union failed in 1946, federalism emerged as the best structure for accommodating the country's diverse political traditions and socio-economic structures. And so, the Federation of Malaya was born in 1948. This layered configuration of power also made it so easy for the polity to expand into Malaysia in 1963.

But centralist tendencies had always lurked within this conception. And this tendency took concrete form after May 13, 1969. The New Economic Policy's attempt to balance racialist concerns with economic development was a commendable effort, but one that was bound to fail. It ended up enhancing racial and religious divisions instead.

More than that, it allowed racialism to become the de facto federal ideology. And with that federal

government growing more centralist by the year, especially under Dr Mahathir Mohamad, racialism provided the excuse for the country's institutions to discard not only principles of accountability and transparency, but also federalist principles as well.

Racial complexity in the civil service — and in the rest of society — was encouraged. Governance had to suffer in the long run, and notions of justice and the common good were replaced by racialist bullying and political arbitrariness.

The present spat over the right of certain states to 5 per cent of the revenues received from petroleum extracted off their coasts is but one of many symptoms of centralism having overshadowed federalism.

Petronas, the national petroleum company, had been making 5 per cent payments to Terengganu state since 1978, but stopped these abruptly after Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS) took over the state in 1999. Payments subsequently made after that state came back to the BN fold in 2004 have been titled "compassionate payments". Sarawak and Sabah are other states with rights to petroleum revenues.

Kelantan, the eternal opposition state, is now demanding their 5 per cent share, interestingly championed by the founder of Petronas, Mr Razaleigh Hamzah, who is also Umno's Member of Parliament for Gua Musang in Kelantan.

The Kelantan prince has lately become the major voice of dissent within the ruling federal coalition.

By pushing this issue, Mr Razaleigh, along with opposition leaders, is doing nothing less than continuing the uncovering of the centralism that has crept so deeply into Malaysian governance

since the '70s.

Indeed, it can be argued that the divisions in Malaysia, often seen to be racial or religious in character, is due largely to excessive centralism, and, as in the case of Kelantan, to the unequal distribution of wealth.

Now, when centralism is challenged, signs of the conflict become evident. These range from serious matters such as eager police investigations into every report made against Mr Lim Guan Eng, the Chief Minister of opposition-run Penang state, to more laughable ones such as the case of federal toilets.

Outside a public toilet recently constructed off the main road at Hillside Tanjung Bunga in Penang stands a sign that is as posh as the building it fronts is pretentious.

It says "Projek ini adalah sumbangan kerajaan persekutuan" — This project is funded by the Federal Government.

The fact that a central government that returns about 3 per cent of what it takes out of Penang state should make it a point to politicise the simple matter of a toilet being built for visitors to the hawk centre close by reveals how low the country's nation-building ambitions have sunk.

Judging from the irritation this sign seems to be causing among local residents, how the federal government hopes to win any vote at all from this show of petulance is beyond imagination. ■

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