



socialistworld.net

website of the committee for a workers' international

Malaysia

Pro-capitalist policies of National Front government worsen racial polarisation

Hindu Rights Action Force campaign underlines need for socialist solution

Raviechandren
CWI, Malaysia

18 January 2008

Malaysia

Pro-capitalist policies of National Front government worsen racial polarisation

Hindu Rights Action Force campaign underlines need for socialist solution

Raviechandren, CWI, Malaysia

On 25th November, almost 30,000 Indian people, without fear, converged in Kuala Lumpur to highlight the longstanding racial discriminations and inequalities practiced by the ruling government against Indians in Malaysia despite a massive crackdown by the government.

Almost 75% of the protesters in the rally were youth who felt alienated in not getting equal opportunities from the government in jobs, education, starting small businesses, buying houses etc. The demonstration, organised by HINDRAF (Hindu Rights Action Force), was widely covered in the international media and got international attention. This was the second major rally in the capital in just two weeks. The previous protest rally, organised by 'Bersih' ('Clean') to demand electoral reform, had been the biggest in a decade. It had attracted similar numbers, mainly from the Malay urban population. But the government is extremely worried about the widespread discontent amongst Indian people expressed by the HINDRAF rally – even more than the impact of the Bersih rally.

The ruling government did not anticipate that such huge anger would have developed from the majority of Indians who have been loyal supporters of the National Front government. In past elections, the ruling parties have been confident of majority Indian support, but with growing dissatisfaction against government policies, a significant number of Indian voters could be swayed towards opposition in the upcoming general election. The Indian leader, Samy Velu and his party - the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) which is part of National Front - is now scorned and hated by the majority Indians for its failure to raise Indian standards of living and to safeguard the right for Indians to practice their own religion and use their own language.

Discrimination against Indians

There are a number of racial and religious discrimination issues that have inflamed the anger of Indians. They include: government insensitivity in demolishing Hindu temples that have been established for many years, for development projects; police brutality and discrimination against Indian prisoners, identifying them as gangsters; the shortage of Tamil primary

schools and poor conditions; the government's continual abandonment of Indian plantation workers in estates with low wages, poor conditions and no decent alternative housing; the state's pro-Muslim laws that prejudice the rights of Hindus when their spouse converts to Islam; the university quota system for admission of Malay students that discriminates against Indian students with similar or better results; government favouritism towards Malays in offering public sector jobs as well as the jobs quota to Malays in certain private sector employment which has alienated Indians; the concessions given to Malays for buying houses but not to Indians with similar social status.

Indians, mostly Tamils and Hindus, are a minority in Malaysia with around 8% of the total population of 27 million. Although there are some capitalists (the second richest person in Malaysia is Indian) as well as some middle class professionals with significant numbers of lawyers and doctors among them, most Indians belong to the working class. During British colonialism, Indians were brought to Malaya through an invidious form of labour recruitment from between 1786 and 1947. They have lived in poverty and poor conditions, on plantations which offered little or no mobility. Most Indians began to desert the plantation sector especially in the 1990s, mainly due to extremely low wages. Now the sector is worked by foreign labour but many Indians continue to be labourers and semi-skilled workers in the towns and cities.

The growing dissatisfaction among Indians is particularly because of the government's 'divide and rule' policies which are more favourable to the majority Malays who constitute 60% of the population. These policies are implemented by bureaucratically controlled government departments, which have acted in favour of Malay elites and capitalists in the name of 'Malay special rights'. These special rights to Malays have been in force since independence in 1957 and further affirmed in National Economic Policies (NEP) in the 1970s.

The NEP was established as an affirmative action programme to alleviate poverty and to distribute wealth equally, though mainly to address the Malays' socio-economic grievances after the May 1969 racial riots between Chinese and Malays. These policies, such as in education, job opportunities, business con-

tracts, land/housing ownership etc., were later used as 'divide and rule' methods to maintain the support of the majority Malays for the government. The NEP, which was supposed to eliminate poverty and raise the living standards of ordinary Malays, has, on the contrary, hugely benefited the Malay elite and capitalists. Recently, it was revealed that the wealth gap between the minority of rich Malays and the majority of ordinary Malays has been widening. Consequently, increasing numbers of Malays have been voicing their disappointment against the NEP and urging the government to abolish it and distribute the wealth equally to benefit the ordinary people.

On the other hand the majority of Chinese, who constitute around 30% of the population, are economically and socially better off than Indians and Malays. They control around 40% of the economy with Malays and Indians having around 20% and 1% respectively. Although there are poor Chinese workers, when it comes to their social needs, the Chinese community, which is mainly middle class and professionals, is able to sustain itself through its economic weight. Most workers and middle class people in the Indian community have similar or inferior social and economic status as their Malay counterparts. Many Malay youths from traditional Malay villages with agricultural activities who moved into urban areas to find jobs and a better life after the 1960s are also facing the impact of neo-liberalism that affects the working class and poor.

However, due to the special rights accorded to Malays by government, it has been seen by many Indians that the opportunities for them are being neglected and they have to compete on a non-Malay platform which includes Chinese to fight for certain opportunities. The increasing social problems, such as suicide attempts, gangsterism, crime and others, amongst Indians shows the increasing social and economic alienation of the Indian working class. The neo-liberal policies of the government and increasing living costs have further aggravated their frustration. This makes more Indians, especially youth, enraged over the policies of the government led by UMNO (United Malay National Organisation).

Chinese and Indian business entrepreneurs are also unhappy with the government's favourable policies towards Malay entrepreneurs, especially in offering government tenders that prioritise Malays, and at policies such as the 30% equity ownership allocation for Malays in private companies. The main beneficiaries of such policies are UMNO cronies and Malay national capitalists. This is the main attempt of the government - to build the Malay capitalist class. Nevertheless, with intense global competition, in order to attract foreign investors, the government has sometimes ignored these policies in order to find favour with multinational companies.

The failure of the government to provide equal opportunities and rights in the practice of religions and languages, as enshrined in the constitution, has also amplified the insecure feelings and sentiments among Indians and Chinese. The situation of insecurity has been further aggravated by the racial and religious politics of ruling communal parties as well as opposition parties.

The Indian working class expected that the MIC, which has been part of the ruling government since independence, would elevate the social and economic status of Indians. But the MIC, with its close partnership with UMNO and the MCA (Malaysian Chinese Association) in the ruling National Front government has carried out projects and business ventures in the name of Indians to benefit the Indian elite and its cronies rather than raising the living standards of the majority of ordinary Indians. Meanwhile, the emergence of parties in opposition to the MIC, such as the IPF (Indian Progressive Front), which initially gained support among Indian workers and poor, could not provide a political solution on Indian issues. Its membership ultimately either disappeared or merged into the MIC fold.

Opposition parties have used the sentiments and frustrations among Indians to increase their respective electoral support rather than to put forward a concrete political solution to the problems of Indian working class and youth. All these factors have created a vacuum in the representation of the needs of Indian workers and youth in Malaysian politics. In spite of efforts to create one, there is, as yet, no mass workers' party that could unite workers and youth regardless of race and religion to counter the reactionary policies of government and other right-wing political parties. HINDRAF, which was relatively unknown until it provided Indian Malaysians with a vehicle to vent feelings that were constrained over many years, has capitalised on the political vacuum by campaigning on the racial discrimination and socio-economic alienation suffered by Indians.

HINDRAF, which is a coalition of 30 Indian or Hindu groupings and has a leadership of middle-class professionals, was formed to highlight the sentiments and frustrations of the Indian community towards the government. Thinking they would suffer less repression than if they made a head-on protest against the Malaysia government, they put forward a programme to appeal to the Queen of England! This was pleading for support of a class-action suit against the British government for bringing Indians to Malaysia (then Malaya) as indentured labourers and exploiting them for 150 years during the British colonisation of Malaysia. They launched road-shows and signature campaigns to support this programme throughout the country, attracting workers, students and middle class professionals, which have been gained tremendous

support. The majority of Indians who turned out on 25th November have no illusions that the Queen of England will solve their problems or that the class-action suit will win. They responded to the organisers' call for demonstrations in order to express their frustrations and sentiments against the government's racial and religious discrimination and highlight their socio-economic plight.

Failure of pro-capitalist National Front government

Since independence, the National Front government has maintained and used the racial status quo to safeguard its privileges and its pro-capitalist policies. The continuous socio-economic inequalities between races in Malaysian multi-racial society after independence result from the capitalist policies of the National Front government. These profit-oriented policies have continually made the elites and capitalists - of Malays, Chinese and Indians. At the same time, these policies have ignored the fundamental socio-economic needs of the ordinary working and middle class people regardless of race and religion, and have further aggravated racial polarisations between them.

The utter dissatisfaction over socio-economic issues highlighted by the Indian community in the recent big rally demonstrated the highly fragile nature of Malaysian society with its racial and religious polarisations implemented by the ruling parties. This has also confirmed that the socio-economic needs of different races and religious people could not be fulfilled with merely political rhetoric or marriages of convenience between different racial political parties. Moreover, it has once again been clearly confirmed that, since independence 50 years ago, the government of the National Front has not employed one concrete political solution to the socio-economic needs of ordinary Malaysian workers and poor but has acted as a medium to benefit the elites and the capitalists.

With capitalism in Malaysia, not only working class Indians are discriminated against but also the working class Malays. For instance, by 2004, 8.3% of Malays were still living in poverty (earning less than RM650 a month) and in 2007, one out of every five people in the state of Terengganu (one of the poorest states of Malaysia) which is 95% Malay, lives below the poverty line. There are also many social problems such as drug abuse, illegal street racing and others in Malay populations because of socio-economic alienations by Malay elites.

Government attacks HINDRAF

Recently, the government arrested five leaders of

HINDRAF under the Internal Security Act (ISA) under which they can be detained indefinitely without trial. They were accused on various baseless charges, from being seditious to having links with terrorist groups such as the LTTE in Sri Lanka. Socialists condemned the use of draconian laws and undemocratic treatment of dissidents. However, the main aim of the government is to suppress the HINDRAF organisation and to avoid further protests and demonstrations, as well as to prevent the further weakening of its electoral support among Indians. Nevertheless, the anger and discontent against racial discrimination among Indians will remain as long as there are no concrete solutions.

On the other hand, some of the HINDRAF leaders have gained much respect from their supporters for their courage and commitment to highlighting the racial discrimination against Indians. However, could HINDRAF with its programmes and tactics, such as demanding affirmative action for Indians and garnering support from ruling class figures in countries such as India and Britain, find the solution to this racial and religious discrimination?

Racial and religious discrimination are also common in both Britain and India. The working and poor Muslim and black people in Britain are amongst the most deprived and there is no intervention from the British Queen to correct it. India is a country in which the capitalist political parties have been using caste, race and religion in their politics, which has polarised the population. Therefore, the working class of these countries are also confronted by discrimination and deprivation. In that respect, the governments and political parties in these countries, which are incapable of solving racial and religious issues in their own countries, will definitely not be able to find solutions to the racial problems in Malaysia.

In fact, racial and religious discrimination are not something that has happened by chance but is bred by the system that we are living in - the capitalist system that has been followed by governments in Malaysia as well as in India and Britain. In that respect, it will not be possible to find a solution under this system which is using the race and religious cards to divide and rule the ordinary people to retain power and safeguard the uninterrupted profit expansion of the ruling class.

While socialists support policies aimed at encouraging oppressed layers in society to claim their rights, the present Malaysian government creating specific affirmative policies for Indians would only create similar problems to those that have been created by the NEP special rights for Malays. UMNO's attempts to enlarge the Malay capitalist class with affirmative policies for Malays has simply created a small number of Malay billionaires and millionaires, while neglecting

the fundamental needs of the majority of working class and other Malays.

Discrimination and inequality are part and parcel of the capitalist system and will remain a problem under this system for Malaysian society. There is a need to counter poverty and inequality regardless of race and religion and to find permanent solutions for racial and religious discrimination in Malaysia. Socialists stand for a united struggle for more resources to bring all workers and ordinary people up to decent standard of living rather than 'robbing Samy to pay Ahmad'.

Although, socialists could not agree with the narrow racial perspective adopted by the HINDRAF leadership, they could still participate and intervene independently in the rallies that attract thousands of workers and middle class people, putting class programmes and tactics to raise the consciousness of the workers and young people about the roots of the problems they face and the solutions.

The government could actually use HINDRAF's demands to instigate counter-action on the part of the Malay population over the threats to their rights in order to increase its electoral support. Therefore the HINDRAF activities arguing against Malay special rights and in favour of affirmative policies for Indians could alienate the Malay working and middle class, if the issue is not correctly linked to the exploitative nature of the state and the need for a united struggle. On the other hand, increasing dissatisfaction among ordinary Malays over the manipulative nature of the NEP, and the recent huge turnout of urban Malays in the Bersih rally to express dissatisfaction over government policies, demonstrate the possibilities for uniting working class Malays with their Indian counterparts, for common struggle.

United action of working class

Nowadays, most of the time, the working class of Malaysia - of all races and religions - are suffering similar privations under the capitalist system. They are experiencing low wages, poor working conditions, long working hours, higher living costs with inflation. They also see for themselves the mismanagement of funds, corruption and growing bureaucracy in the police, judiciary and government departments. The repercussions of the neo-liberal policies of the government are also affecting every worker and layers of the middle class. On many occasions in Malaysia, workers and ordinary people have united to fight on common issues. In early November, more than 4,000 bank-workers from across the country, regardless of race and religion, demanded bonus and wage increases from bank employers who are making billions in profits.

Working class Malays and Chinese have more simi-

larities with the problems faced by Indians under the capitalist system than with the employers. In order to build on that, the racial discrimination faced by Indians should be linked to the incapacity of capitalism to provide for the fundamental needs of the majority of working people. Only truly democratic socialist planning, with all major resources publicly owned, could begin to eliminate repression and discrimination and put the nation on the road to genuine racial harmony.

Workers and poor people should play the main role in controlling and managing the productive and socio-economic forces in the process of moving towards a socialist society that prioritises the needs of all. In order to achieve this, workers and youth in Malaysia need to build a mass party of the working class, based on a socialist programme that could act as guide and tool to achieve this ultimate goal.