



*By Dr Lim Teck Ghee*

*First published in [CPI](#)*

A UK-based solicitor and lawyer – appointed by Hindraf Makkal Sakthi – is scheduled to meet with members of the Malaysian public this Sunday (Aug 14).

His fact-finding mission is to help him better understand the situation on the ground and interview those participating in the Hindraf class action suit. This lawsuit against the British government seeks to correct historical injustices inflicted on Indians who were brought to the peninsula by the white colonialists.

The Hindraf move is almost certain to court a fresh storm of controversy and criticism from

Umno, the party that will be most embarrassed when full details of the Indian marginalization emerge. The extent to which the local Indian community, particularly Hindus of Tamil stock, is excluded from the nation's progress and wellbeing can only reflect badly on the Malaysian government.

Due to the stony deaf ears at home, Hindraf has had no choice but to petition abroad for redress, as outlandish as the amount of relief sought might sound. The case being heard in England will enable it coverage from the international press. The deliberate neglect of a minority that perceives itself as oppressed by a government acting in bad faith will soon be laid bare to the world.

Umno's extremist supporters such as Perkasa and *Utusan Malaysia* persist in denying allegations of discrimination against Indians although the plight of the community's underclass is evident to all. Just look at who are the homeless people who sleep along five-footways in the derelict parts of town.

More thoughtful Malaysians, however, are aware that the Indian community has come down, and continued falling a long way, in their socio-economic development and life prospects.

Accusing the Indian-based organization Hindraf of disloyalty and worse is merely closing the stable door after the horse has bolted.

During the past 50 years since Independence, only a small minority of Indians have benefitted from the political and economic largesse handed out by the government. The majority have seen little or no improvement despite the fact that the much of the economic prosperity and development of the country was built, almost literally, on their back and their hard labour.

Disclosure of the exact socio-economic status of the community is hampered by a system in which there is a lack of transparency in the collection and release of data that may relate to the plight of non-Malays – the apparent fudging excused on grounds of ethnic sensitivity but more likely due to other politically driven manipulation and agenda.

Although difficult to come by, all available data clearly point to the fact that the relative performance of the Indian community has deteriorated across a wide range of socio-economic indicators. The decline has been especially steep over the last four decades after 1970 with the commencement of the NEP.

Indian impoverishment can be traced to two major developments.

One is the displacement (and also the lack of replacement) of Indians in the civil service. In 1966, one third of all Indian workers were employed in government or quasi-government jobs. In 2006, only 2.8 percent of Malaysian Indians employed were still to be found working in the public sector.

The other development has been the displacement of Indian rural workers by the massive unchecked and officially sanctioned influx of over three million foreign workers, and the absence of any compensatory programmes, including access to state and federal land and rural development schemes.

The predominantly Muslim foreign workforce, largely from Indonesia, the Southern Philippines and Bangladesh, has displaced Indians from their traditional habitats and livelihoods so that Indians now form an urban and semi-rural underclass. The slums in which they live today are largely ignored by the government and racked by social and family breakdown and disorder.

Of course, ethnicity is not the only variable in determining access to social services, education,

health benefits, land and other forms of development assistance provided by the government in Malaysia.

Politics, class, region, family background and other variables also come into play. But for many poor and lower middle-class Indians – especially those from the younger generation – the fact that they are not bumiputera or Muslim mark them out for special discrimination and marginalisation. Some will make it and escape poverty but the majority will remain severely disadvantaged unless there is a dramatic reversal in state policy.

Malaysians must raise their voices and oppose the state planned policy of exclusion and its unabashed execution by the authorities, all the way from national down to district level even if what amounts to a one-party state system has successfully managed to steamroll it through.

When the Hindraf class action suit is heard in London, then the morally repugnant practice of pushing the weakest segments of society to the brink will be made better known to all.

If we are to survive well as a nation and society, the government – and this includes the state governments presently controlled by the opposition – must not only pay attention to the needs

of the politically dominant majority.

Those holding the reins of power (from whichever party) should ensure justice and fairness in the way they treat the minorities, especially the smaller non-Muslim minorities that lag behind the Malays and Chinese, and are lacking in political and economic clout.

How the government responds to the admirable campaign for inclusion, justice and equality for poor Indians will demonstrate to Malaysians whether 1Malaysia is all talk without any walk or whether the government may have finally found the political will and moral fibre to right this long-standing historical wrong.

Kuala Lumpur, 11 August 2011

*Dr Lim Teck Ghee is Director, Centre for Policy Initiatives*

