

Voting for the best of both worlds

Changing the way Malaysia votes by adding proportional representation (PR) to the current first-past-the-post (FPTP) system could help the country move beyond the identity politics that is eroding its social cohesion.

In a mixed voting system, consisting of FPTP local districts and PR national districts, political parties would have the incentive to develop strong national policies so that a broad range of voters would be attracted to support them, says Prof Thomas Gschwend, who teaches political science at Mannheim University, Germany.

While FPTP districts encourage local accountability, there is a fear that there is too much focus on local or symbolic issues which appeal easily to voters, says Gschwend in an interview with The Edge.

"The current electoral system is playing into identity politics. In order to get elected, you need to get a majority of votes in your district, that's all," he says.

Gschwend, who was in Malaysia to share his research on electoral systems with the Electoral Reform Committee, explains that in a PR system, parties have to nominate a number of candidates to a party list which voters can vote for.

Parties would adopt different strategies to get experts in different fields such as social, economic and foreign policy matters to join them, he says, as they need to have specialists who are able to present ideas and draft policies.

In a PR system, for parties to attract enough support from a broad voter base, dwelling on issues related to identity would not be enough, says Gschwend. They have to provide solutions to pressing national problems to be prominent in voters' minds.

He was responding to a question about whether the election system could be designed to make issues of race and religion become less effective for winning seats.

In the FPTP voting system, which

ing the right to reliable information and is itself an exacerbating factor.

There is a clear correlation, he says, between suppression of media freedom and the response to the Covid-19 outbreak. For example, China and Iran imposed extensive censorship on coverage of the pandemic.

RSF also found that harsh legislation against fake news on Covid-19 in Iraq and Hungary shows that the ongoing public health crisis has allowed authoritarian governments to implement a notorious "shock doctrine".

There is no such shock doctrine here but the government's interpretation of fake news is, nevertheless, a concern, that is, if criticism against ministers and the government is classified as fake news.

A big worry is Senior Minister (Security Cluster) Datuk Seri Ismail Sabri Yaakob's warning that stern action will be taken against the media for "confusing and inaccurate" articles regarding government statements.

Deloitte notes that there are countries taking advantage of the fact that politics is on hold, the public is stunned and pro-



PATRICK GOH/THE EDGE

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Malaysia practises, the candidate who wins the most votes wins the seat even if he or she does not secure the support of a majority of the voters.

"The most salient item that a leader can use to do this is identity," says Gschwend. "It's so easily available and it's obvious even to people who don't follow politics. So a single member electoral system makes this even stronger."

If some form of proportional representation is used, it automatically encourages a focus on national districts, he says. "Therefore you don't have direct local accountability for those MPs and they are more likely to follow some kind of national agenda," he says.

In a mixed system, you have the best of both worlds — there are FPTP districts that encourage local accountability, and PR districts that cater for national interests, he says. — *By Rash Behari Bhattacharjee*

tests are out of the question in order to impose measures that would be impossible in normal times.

Hence, he says, "for this decisive decade to not be a disastrous one, people of goodwill, whoever they are, must campaign for journalists to be able to fulfil their role as society's trusted third parties, which means they must have the capacity to do so".

Lastly, whatever happened to our media council? The one the PH government tried to introduce before it lost power in February's political coup. The aim of the council was to strengthen freedom of the press and ensure that the rights of its practitioners are covered while promoting ethical media practices.

Hopefully, it is just being put on hold to allow the current administration to tackle the pandemic. Once we have overcome this nightmare, I hope the PN government will put it back on track and not flush it down the drain. ■

Mohsin Abdullah is a contributing editor at The Edge. He has covered politics for more than four decades.

When even the minister is perplexed

This is not about whether Malaysia should allow the Rohingya to stay or turn them away. A lot has been said about the issue and the debate is still raging.

We are asking why this upsurge of anti-Rohingya sentiment has suddenly surfaced amid the Covid-19 crisis. Even the authorities, including Senior Minister (Security Cluster) Datuk Seri Ismail Yaakob, are perplexed at the tide of negative sentiment against the community. After all, the minister said, the issue of Rohingya seeking refuge in Malaysia is not something new.

There are videos, audio clips and articles inciting anger against the Rohingya community floating about in the social media space which, said Ismail, the police are aware of and are investigating.

As Ismail pointed out, only the authorities can determine whether the materials are authentic. So, he wants Malaysians to remain calm and give the police the space to investigate.

However, judging from comments on social media, a substantial number of Malaysians — in particular, Malays — are apparently taken up by the anti-Rohingya rhetoric, including what Rohingya community leaders have said was fake news.

Just who are behind the anti-Rohingya materials? Why are they spreading such news, especially now? Who is to gain from such a campaign? Is the campaign coordinated? Is it a campaign in the first place? These are all big questions, the answers to which we do not know yet.

What we do know is that although there are many Malaysians who are sympathetic to the plight of the Rohingya, an equally large number are taken up by the anti-Rohingya rhetoric.

And they are so angry they are spreading hate speech and xenophobia. Some Rohingya activists claim they have been threatened with death and rape. A video of a Rohingya man being verbally abused and bullied by a Malay has gone viral. Only the authorities can tell whether the video is genuine.

So, why have many, Muslim Malays in particular, allowed themselves to become so incensed that they are venting their anger on fellow Muslims?

Obviously, some have had bad experiences with members of the Rohingya community and what they have picked up on social media has only infuriated them further. Their comments could not be more specific.

Granted, there are members of the community who seem to forget their suffering in Rakhine state in Myanmar once they are safe in Malaysia. But isn't this a case of blaming the entire community because of the behaviour of a few rotten apples?

Likewise, says Ilham Centre CEO Azlan Zainal, not all Malaysians are launching attacks on Rohingya as the majority of Malaysians are not xenophobic. Here, Azlan, whose political views I often quote, is talking in his capacity as a volunteer with a local group involved in humanitarian aid for refugees.

"Many are feeling the pressure of the Movement Control Order — maybe that is one reason for the anger. The number of divorce and domestic violence cases is also high during this period," says Azlan.

A veteran journalist who has covered the Rohingya issue extensively says, "I can only think the ordinary *rakyat* can easily be inflamed when they are forced to stay home, risk losing their jobs and their money woes are mounting."

The anger, he says, will be more profound in areas with a high density of Rohingya living among the local population and government aid is limited and slow to reach them. "This is when they will be most vulnerable and lash out at anything or anyone perceived to be taking advantage of their hospitality. And the largely Malay anger against the Rohingya is made worse by the absence of influential leaders coming out to appeal for calm and common sense to prevail."

According to Azlan, the latest outburst occurred after a boat carrying some 200 Rohingya refugees was detained in Langkawi. It is believed a human trafficking syndicate was involved. A few days later, the authorities turned away another boat carrying Rohingya.

Soon afterwards, several postings appeared on Facebook defending the action taken by the authorities, which some international human rights bodies criticised.

But things got worse when a letter allegedly written by a leader of the Rohingya community in Malaysia went viral. The letter contained a demand for equal rights and a range of other demands. It also called Malays stupid.

The Rohingya here dismissed the letter as fake and some even distanced themselves from the writer, claiming he is just an individual and not the community leader.

Which brings us to lawyer Khairul Azman Aziz, who is infamous for his stance on Chinese New Year decorations put up in a school in Puchong early this year. He has also applied to the courts to determine whether vernacular schools are unconstitutional. And he was also the lawyer for the two youth detained in connection with a theft and brawl at Kuala Lumpur's Low Yat Plaza in 2015.

Khairul, who is vice-president of Parti Bumiputera Perkasa Malaysia (Putra), was charged in February with inciting Malays against the Chinese and Indians via a Facebook post. He pleaded not guilty.

Anyway, he has now allegedly come up with a list of so-called "25 demands of the Malay community" to be presented to the prime minister. The subject matter is all about Malay rights and Islam.

The message, titled "It's the turn of the Malays to make demands", is already making the rounds, especially via WhatsApp. Although the authenticity of the message cannot be ascertained, it is nevertheless divisive. The Rohingya bashing needs to be contained before it gets out of hand. — *By Mohsin Abdullah* ■