

| Delineation: A question of fairness and unfairness

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COMMENTARY, SARAWAK

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All arguments have their own merits, but each argument is spiced with political bias, says Jayum.

THE recent exercise to increase representation from the present 82 seats in the Sarawak Legislative Assembly to 99 has invited interesting opinions from various quarters.

One opinion argues that the increase is politically motivated; another claims gerrymandering to further boost support for the ruling party, GPS, and particularly PBB.

Another opinion centres on the fairness of the delineation exercise. This argument presents several factors that bring into question 'fairness' in terms of different areas or size of constituencies and also the number of people that inhabit each constituency.

It further posits that sparse areas with lesser votes could overwhelm semi-urban and especially urban areas where the constituency tends to be smaller in size but is heavily populated.

Some pro-government ruling party's arguments say the increase is inevitable and a good thing as the expansion would bring more development to peripheral or marginalised areas that have not been given due attention.

All arguments have their own merits, but each argument is spiced with political bias.

The argument that urban areas are underrepresented because urban seats have many times the number of voters compared to rural seats is not sustainable, as major development projects have been carried out in urban centres to the disadvantage of rural people.

Some lawmakers are quick to support this simplistic argument.

The view of unfairness in the delineation exercise and the worry that rural areas will dominate semi-urban and especially urban areas is clearly misguided. The focus of development has been on urban areas that are usually seen as the engine of economic growth. It is the minority and supposedly less powerful urban areas that have benefitted from a high rate of development compared to rural areas.

The question of fairness is academic, and there is no end to the discourse. Each argumentator will have their respective bias and perspective that may not overlap. The issue is not new and not unique to Sarawak, Malaysia, or any other democratically constructed nations that have representation.

To mitigate this 'fairness' or 'unfairness' issue, perhaps lessons from other democracies may shed some light.

For example, California sends 54 representatives to the US Congress. This is the largest compared to Alaska and Delaware, which send three each. So, the representatives from the 50 states in the US range from three to 54 persons.

Is that fair to Alaska and Delaware, which is a state just like California that has 54 in the Congress. Both states would be overwhelmed by California any time in Congress.

To give a semblance of fairness, each of the 50 states elect two from their respective states to be members of the US Senate. Here, all states are equal as each has one vote.

In the former, it was also considered fair because bigger and more populous states have bigger say in governance. However, the question of fairness should be addressed from a larger perspective and not narrow based on the increase and the delineation of more seats.

First, there is a need to have a proper representation of each major community. This may require that the number of seats in the Sarawak Legislative Assembly be determined based first on population size.

Second, all districts, regardless of size and population, may need to have lawmakers to represent the interest of all districts. This may require the need to look at the structure of representation, especially the idea that the time may have come to have a dual chamber for the Sarawak Legislative Assembly.

Beyond Sarawak, representations need to be reviewed at the federal level. The number of seats in parliament needs to be reviewed to reflect the three-region partnership in the formation of Malaysia.

Representation cannot be based on the present number of seats in the lower house (Dewan Rakyat) that erroneously gives advantage to the peninsula. Similarly, the arbitrary appointment to the upper house (Dewan Negara) needs to be reviewed.

Although all states/regions send two representatives to the senate, the other 44 members cannot be solely decided by the Prime Minister. A better mechanism must be instituted to prevent abuse of this privilege.

After more than 60 years of the Federation of Malaysia, it is time to go back to the negotiating table to strengthen the federation in politics, socio-cultural and economic development to create a one nation consistent with the five tenets of the national ideology, Rukun Negara.

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DUN seats

jayum jawan

Sarawak
