

‘Half-baked idea’: Don, economist scoff at proposed Dayak version of Indians’ Mitra

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Datuk Prof Dr Jayum Jawan (left) and Datuk Prof Dr Madeline Berma

KUCHING (Oct 31): Two leading Dayak intellectuals have expressed reservations over a recent proposal put forward in Parliament that the Dayak community should have their own version of the Malaysian Indian Transformation Unit (Mitra).

They cautioned that the issues faced by the Dayak and Indian communities differ significantly, saying what was introduced to uplift the Indian community may not necessarily work for the Dayaks.

Datuk Prof Dr Jayum Jawan described the suggestion by Selangau MP Edwin Banta, that Putrajaya establish a special unit similar to Mitra to coordinate socioeconomic programmes for the Dayak community nationwide, as “misplaced” and “a half-baked idea discussed over a bowl of kampua noodles.”

The Academy of Sciences Malaysia Fellow and Universiti Malaysia Sarawak Institute of Borneo Studies adjunct professor said the situation faced by the Dayaks is distinct from that of the Indians.

“Unlike the Indians, the Dayaks already have strong representation in the Sarawak Legislative Assembly and in Parliament. What they need is unity and a consolidated front to address their challenges,” he said.

“The Dayaks’ lack of progress is largely due to the mediocrity of their own lawmakers in introducing workable solutions that can rally and resolve key issues.”

Jayum cited native customary rights (NCR) land issue as an example, saying that while many landowners continue to lose their land, disputes are often prolonged by bureaucratic red tape.

“Many Dayak assemblymen are also not on the same page regarding how such issues should be handled... each answering to different leaderships with conflicting agendas,” he claimed.

He pointed out that unlike the Indian community, the Dayaks are not politically marginalised as they have at least three full ministers in the state Cabinet, as well as a Deputy Premier post.

“The issue is not marginalisation but underperformance,” he stressed.

Jayum also cautioned that the Dayak community is now on the precipice of a leadership vacuum as many senior leaders are nearing retirement.

“The Malay, Melanau and Chinese communities appear ready with new and well-educated leaders. The Dayaks, however, lack a strong second echelon.

“Many upcoming leaders lack the education and experience of their more senior counterparts,” he said.

Also disagreeing with the proposal for a special development unit for the Dayak was economist and Malaysian Future Institute Fellow Datuk Prof Dr Madeline Berma.

“Setting up a new institution means creating another bureaucratic layer, but it does not address the root causes of Dayak underdevelopment such as high poverty rates, low academic achievement, unemployment, and low income levels,” she said.

Madeline said the focus should instead be on strengthening governance and ensuring existing ministries and programmes deliver effectively.

“Rather than creating more institutions, the priority should be improving governance — ensuring accountability, transparency, and efficiency in resource management and decision-making,” she said.

Mitra is a special unit under the Prime Minister’s Department focusing on the socioeconomic development of the Indian community, particularly the B40 group.

Originally established in 2014 as the Socioeconomic Development of the Indian Community, it was rebranded as Mitra in 2018 to reflect a broader and more strategic transformation agenda.

When tabling his proposal during the 2026 Supply Bill debate in Parliament, Edwin said the Dayak community needed a coordinated mechanism to deliver financial assistance, skills training, and entrepreneurship support nationwide, particularly in Sarawak and Sabah.

He described the proposed unit as a comprehensive platform to accelerate rural development and bridge socioeconomic gaps, calling it “a step towards strengthening the national inclusivity agenda that reflects the ethnic diversity and needs of East Malaysia’s indigenous communities.”