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PHOTOS BY CHEAH CHIN BOON
Society discriminates against transgenders and they have trouble landing decent jobs

TANJUNG Bungah state assemblyman Teh Yee Cheu is popularly referred to as “YB *Mak Nyah*” but he is as manly as the next guy. Teh is also not offended by this label many full-blooded men would consider derogatory. He has earned the moniker fair and square.

Teh is likely the only politician and elected representative who is actively and openly fighting for the rights of the transgender community.

Recently, he tried to push through a proposal to form an institute in Penang to help transgenders. The ultimate objective, he says, is to protect the largely ignored community’s rights.

As expected, the move by Teh was quickly dismissed.

Teh, who has constantly been drawing attention to the plight of transgenders since his election in 2008, had attempted to table a Private Member’s Bill in the Penang state assembly to get the green light for his proposal for a transgender institute. The bill was promptly dismissed.

Chief Minister Lim Guan Eng says Teh has to toe the party line, but he is also quick to state that Penang is not opposed to transgender rights. “There needs to be a proper platform for this cause,” he says. But Lim fails to say what the platform should be.

“This is his (Teh) personal motion, it is not DAP’s stand, nor is it the Penang Pakatan Rakyat government’s motion. He did it without consent,” Lim says.

The failed attempt has only galvanised Teh to redouble efforts.

Mak Nyah is a local term reserved mostly for transgenders. They are also referred to as *pondans* – a derogatory term. They are scorned by society, and have problems fitting in, including finding career advancing jobs.

Teh vows to continue with his quest to bring attention to the needs of transgenders. Quoting a figure from a study conducted by University Sains Malaysia, Teh claims there are around 20,000 transgenders in Penang alone, and the estimate is now higher as many are encouraged to “come out of the closet”.

Teh wants a state-level committee on transgender to be formed, followed by an institute specially for the aggrieved community and an initial funding of RM200,000.

“All of them (fellow DAP assemblymen) are against me. I am alone, and since it is a democracy, I have to withdraw my motion,” Teh recently said.

The rejection showed that political leaders remained ignorant.

“They can keep saying they fight for human rights but their objection to my motion shows that they are not ready for (universal) rights and that they are still close-minded,” he says.

Touched by the plight of transgenders, Teh has constantly raised their issues at the state level, but while most assemblymen concur with him, the lack of pro-active action is disappointing.

His tenacity is exemplary though, as Teh has managed to get a non-partisan panel at the state assembly to oversee the community’s welfare.

The panel included representatives from Pakatan and Barisan Nasional backbenchers.

Teh also took a bold step when he appointed a professed transgender, Hazreen Shaik Daud, as his personal assistant last year.

The fight continues, not just in Malaysia but elsewhere too.

Teh wants the agenda in Penang to be driven by accessibility to healthcare, employment and equal treatment to persons with gender disagreements at public places such as schools, hospitals and detention centres.

Developed countries have begun to accept the LGBT community (lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgender) individuals, but it remains to be seen when Malaysia will address the issue as nothing will ever be resolved if the mentality is to “sweep it under the carpet”. – Ian McIntyre



Teh Yee Cheu