**SCMP Article**

**Heed the voices of HK’s ethnic minorities**

Over the past decade or so, we have seen an important shift in Hong Kong public affairs. Government policymakers, social workers, educators, the media and even some political parties have started to take a bigger interest in the city’s ethnic minorities. Hong Kong’s non-Chinese people are being recognised in a community-wide context. This reflects the fact that minorities are growing as a percentage of the population. It may also be because of the Race Discrimination Ordinance, which came into effect eight years ago.

But there is another important reason why the challenges facing minorities here have gained far more attention. The ethnic minorities themselves have learned how to get together and organise. They have built up an effective lobby and are getting their messages across to officials, the media and politicians.

There are a range of issues they expect the next administration to address. One of these is simply recognition of who and what ethnic minorities are. The groups behind the minorities’ lobby are mainly South Asian – of Nepalese, Pakistani and Indian heritage, along with some of Bangladeshi and Sri Lankan backgrounds. There is also a sizeable community of Filipinos. These are permanent or long-term residents.

Some are not particularly well-off and qualify for welfare and public housing. But many others run businesses of various sizes, and some are professionals with good middle-class incomes. One odd thing is that the label “ethnic minority” usually does not include Hong Kong’s permanent resident population of Westerners. The minorities’ representatives would like to see this changed.

Many people assume that the main problem faced by minorities comes down to language. But the minorities’ representatives say this is too simplistic. Many in these communities speak Cantonese or English, or both. They do face a major barrier in reading and writing Chinese. This affects their ability to access many local college-level educational options and job opportunities, not least in the public sector.

Wealthier non-Chinese in Hong Kong have more alternatives to the government education system and its tough written-Chinese requirements. Poorer minorities, on the other hand, are significantly disadvantaged. For years, they have called for more specialist teaching for minority kids to build up Chinese-language skills. The picture is even worse for minority children with special education needs, who have few options available.

The ethnic minorities are making specific demands of the next government. One is to allow non-native Chinese speakers to have English-medium public schooling. (This would of course benefit all non-Chinese families, including Westerners and those of South or Southeast Asian background.)

Another is to lift Chinese-language requirements in public-sector jobs where they are not necessary. The Hong Kong police have made a start to attract recruits for some positions. This means reversing government policy that makes Chinese ability mandatory.

Ethnic minority representatives stress that their communities’ language abilities should be seen as a potential asset to Hong Kong. These people speak languages of important emerging markets – including some of the key economies involved in China’s “One Belt, One Road” initiative. Indeed, they want recognition for their contribution to Hong Kong, and more emphasis on diversity and inclusiveness – starting in such places as local kindergartens.

The minorities’ lobby also want measures to promote equality. They want officials to take discrimination by landlords more seriously. And they would like the immigration system to be more understanding when minority residents’ overseas relatives need visas to visit during family emergencies.

Most of all, they want the next administration to set up an ethnic minority commission – obviously with minority members well represented. Such a body would oversee policy efforts to accommodate all ethnic minorities in the wider Hong Kong community.

The next government will have a lot of tasks on its plate. A more systematic and serious approach to ethnic minorities’ issues should be one of them.