

NURTURING THE YOUTH OR DEMOCRACY IN MALAYSIAN POLITICAL SYSTEM

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ABSTRACT

After 56 years of Malaysia's independence, the relevancy of concept of democracy still debated. Are there any magnificent changes in our political system? This article discusses the concept of democracy in the perspective of youth in Malaysia. Youth or young people have been defined as a person between the age where he or she may leave compulsory education, and the age at which he or she finds his or her first employment. It is widely being interpreted flexibly and loosely. The article focuses on the youth who are below 30 years old and the rationale is those who are below 30 years old are the main category that currently influencing the politics, economic and social movement of Malaysia's political landscape and questioned the democracy decree.

Keywords: *Democracy, Youth, Young and Political Landscape*

ABSTRAK

Setelah 56 tahun era kemerdekaan berlalu, kerelevanan konsep demokrasi masih lagi diperdebatkan. Adakah terdapat perubahan yang hebat dalam sistem politik tanahair? Artikel ini membincangkan konsep demokrasi dalam perspektif belia di Malaysia. Belia atau orang muda telah diberi ditakrifkan sebagai seorang antara usia di mana dia boleh meninggalkan pendidikan wajib, dan umur di mana dia memulakan pekerjaan pertama. Ia secara meluas ditafsirkan sebagai sebuah takrifan yang fleksibel dan longgar. Artikel ini memberi tumpuan kepada belia yang berumur di bawah 30 tahun dan rasionalnya adalah mereka yang berumur di bawah 30 tahun adalah merupakan kategori utama yang pada masa ini mempengaruhi politik, pergerakan ekonomi dan sosial dalam lanskap politik Malaysia dan seringkali mempersoalkan demokrasi.

Kata Kunci: *Demokrasi, Belia, Muda dan Lanskap Politik*

INTRODUCTION

The hope of democracy in Malaysia finally ignited in the year of 1998, following the renowned 'Reformasi' movement initiated by Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, the current Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) de factor leader and the ex-Deputy Prime Minister (DPM). It was all started with the political conflicts between Datuk Seri Anwar and the Prime Minister by that time, Tun Dr. Mahathir. Datuk Seri Anwar was being sacked as the DPM and being sentenced to a six-year-imprisonment for being guilty in the sodomy charge¹. In consequence, the 'Reformasi' movement was being initiated by Datuk Seri Anwar and his supporters to protest against the coalition government, Barisan Nasional (BN) as well as Tun Dr. Mahathir that being alleged with corruption and staying too long in his office. The largest ever demonstration took place in Dataran Merdeka on 20th September 1998. The crowd that had gathered at the National Mosque for Anwar's landmark Reformasi speech rallied on to Dataran Merdeka for another speech, then on to Jalan Raja Laut and ended up in front of EPF.² All mass rallies were supported by people in the numbers between 30,000 and 100,000 people.³ Reformasi made the democracy spirit of Malaysia to be alive again, with the formation of new party named Parti Keadilan Nasional (Changed into Parti Keadilan Rakyat later in 2004) and the formation of 'Alternative Front' together with PAS and DAP in order to compete against Barisan Nasional (BN). Reformasi breathed new life into Malaysian youth of the 1990s, at a time when youthful zeal and activism spirit had diluted in favor of material wealth and pleasure. Youth started to be aware and active in politics and participate in rallies and demonstration. The former Deputy Prime Minister, Musa Hitam remarked that "If the reformasi movement and demonstrations could be given any significance in terms of Malaysian politics, if there is anything that I could unhesitatingly come to a positive conclusion, it never turns racial. It's amazing. ... It is more issue-based than racial. I'm fascinated."⁴

The whole nation despite of races, age and gender went up and voice out their discontent towards the government. This Reformasi movement is the first time whereby the democracy spirit is being lived by the Malaysians. The result of the 10th General Election in 1999 was influenced by Reformasi too with the reduced winning of BN and for the first time BN lost more than half of the votes from Malay and Bumiputera.

¹ Aliazeera (9 January 2012), "Anwar Ibrahim found guilty of sodomy"

² Anas Alam Faizli (2013), "Anwar Ibrahim & Reformasi: From the eyes of an ordinary citizen"

³ Elizabeth Clarke (1998), *Reformasi hits Malaysia*

⁴ Hwang, In-Won (2003), *Personalized Politics: The Malaysian State under Mahathir*, p.318, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies

Figure 1: Summary of the 29 November 1999 Malaysian Dewan Rakyat Election Results

	Votes	% of vote	Seats	% of seats	+/-
Barisan Nasional (National Front):	3,748,511	56.53	147	76.56	▼19
United Malays National Organization (Pertubuhan Kebangsaan Melayu Bersatu, UMNO)	-	-	71	36.98	▼22
Malaysian Chinese Association (Persatuan Cina Malaysia, MCA)	-	-	29	15.10	-
Malaysian Indian Congress (Kongres India Se-Malaysia, MIC)	-	-	7	3.65	-
Malaysian People's Movement Party (Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia, Gerakan)	-	-	6	3.13	-
People's Progressive Party (Parti Progressif Penduduk Malaysia, PPP)	-	-	-	-	-
Parties in Sarawak	-	-	28	14.58	-
Parties in Sabah	-	-	6	3.13	—
Barisan Alternatif (Alternative Front):	2,667,818	40.23	42	21.88	▲26
Islamic Party of Malaysia (Parti Islam SeMalaysia, PAS)	994,279	14.99	27	14.06	▲19
Democratic Action Party (Parti Tindakan Demokratik, DAP)	830,870	12.53	10	5.21	▲3
National Justice Party (Keadilan) ¹	773,679	11.67	5	2.60	1
Parti Rakyat Malaysia (PRM)	68,990	1.04	0	0.00	0
Parti Beraatu Sabah (PBS) ²	143,342	2.16	3	1.56	▼5
State Reform Party ²	23,354	0.35	0	0	—
Malaysian Democratic Party (Parti Liberal Demokratik, LDP)	8,001	0.12	0	0.0	—
BERJASA	409	0.01	0	0	—
Parti Angkatan Keadilan Insan Malaysia (AKIM)	274	0.00	0	0.0	—
Non-partisans	39,385	0.59	0	0	▼1
Overall total	6,631,094	100	192	100	II/A

Source: *The Star*

The 12th General Election, 2008 Journey

Following the huge loss of the Opposition in the 11th General Election in 2004 due to the high expectations of the new Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi, who succeeded Mahathir in October 2003, the Malaysian democracy was once again endangered and being questioned. However, following the 12th General Election in 2008 and a series of demonstrations and rallies that happened in the past 5 years, Malaysian democracy especially in terms of youth is once again being brought up. The 12th General Election was being marked as 'Political Tsunami' in Malaysian history. The coalition Government, BN suffered the biggest lost ever by only securing 140 parliamentary seats, and losing its two-third majority in Parliamentary seats for the first time after the 1969 election. Meanwhile, the opposition coalition, Pakatan Rakyat swept the state legislatures by winning the state elections in Penang, Selangor, Kelantan, Kedah and Perak.⁵ The election result definitely alarmed the political situation and demography in the whole Malaysia. It showed the discontent and dissatisfaction of the citizens, including a huge amount of young voters as youth towards the coalition government, the BN. The local citizens especially the young people are daring and desperate towards changes in ruling party for a better policies and governance. This induced and motivated the democracy spirit in Malaysia.

⁵ The incident of Perak Constitutional Crisis in 2009 resulted in the overtaking of Perak State Government by Barisan Nasional. This was due to the defections of 3 Pakatan Rakyat's representatives that resulted in Barisan Nasional having more seats in the state election.

Figure 2: Summary of the 8 March 2008 Malaysian Dewan Rakyat Election Results

	Votes	% of vote	Seats	% of seats	+/-
Barisan Nasional (National Front):	3,748,511	56.53	147	76.56	▼19
United Malays National Organization (Pertubuhan Kebangsaan Melayu Bersatu, UMNO)	-	-	71	36.98	▼22
Malaysian Chinese Association (Persatuan Cina Malaysia, MCA)	-	-	29	15.10	-
Malaysian Indian Congress (Kongres India Se-Malaysia, MIC)	-	-	7	3.65	-
Malaysian People's Movement Party (Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia, Gerakan)	-	-	6	3.13	-
People's Progressive Party (Parti Progressif Penduduk Malaysia, PPP)	-	-	-	-	-
Parties in Sarawak	-	-	28	14.58	
Parties in Sabah	-	-	6	3.13	---
Barisan Alternatif (Alternative Front):	2,667,818	40.23	42	21.88	▲26
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Democratic Action Party (Parti Tindakan Demokratik, DAP)	830,870	12.53	10	5.21	▲3
National Justice Party (Keadilan) ¹	773,679	11.67	5	2.60	1
Parti Rakyat Malaysia (PRM)	68,990	1.04	0	0.00	0
Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) ²	143,342	2.16	3	1.56	▼5
State Reform Party ²	23,354	0.35	0	0	---
Malaysian Democratic Party (Parti Liberal Demokratik, LDP)	8,001	0.12	0	0.0	---
BERJASA	409	0.01	0	0	---
Parti Angkatan Keadilan Insan Malaysia (AKIM)	274	0.00	0	0.0	---
Non-partisans	39,385	0.59	0	0	▼1
Overall total	6,631,094	100	192	100	N/A

Source: Sin Chew Jit Poh⁶

The 'Bersih' Rallies

After the 2008 12th General Election, the spirit and passion of Malaysians on democracy were being induced and ignited. As BN is still retaining the majority seat and continue as the ruling party, a series of arbitrary and unfair incidents happened that resulted in the dissatisfaction of the local citizens. The first incident will be the Bersih rally, also known as the Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections. It is a coalition of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Malaysia to seek for clean and fair elections through the reform of electoral system. Malaysian General Election was often being alleged as corrupted and dirty, manipulated by the Election Commission under the Prime Minister Department. Irregularities such as gerrymandering⁷, phantom voters, mal-apportionment⁸ and postal vote frauds are often cited as the factors that BN has all the time retaining the majority seats in election. In response to

⁶ Sources from Sin Chew Jit Poh, "Sin Chew Jit Poh Nationwide Result Statistics", 10 March 2008.

⁷ Griffith, Elmer (1907). *The Rise and Development of the Gerrymander*. Chicago: Scott, Foresman and Co. pp. 72–73. Gerrymandering is a practice that attempts to establish a political advantage for a particular party or group by manipulating district boundaries to create partisan advantaged districts.

⁸ Adam Liptak (2013), *Smaller States Find Outsize Clout Growing in Senate*, The New York Times. Malapportionment or misapportionment is the creation of electoral districts with divergent ratios of voters to representatives. For example, if one single-member district has 10,000 voters and another has 100,000 voters, voters in the former district have ten times the influence, per person, over the governing body.

that, Bersih rallies chaired by Dato' Ambiga Sreenevasan have been carried out for 3 times, in 2007, 2011 and 2012 respectively that recorded Bersih 1.0, Bersih 2.0⁹ and Bersih 3.0 incidents. Each rally recorded the number of protestors up to more than 10000 protestors, which consists of youth and adults that are democracy-spirited. In order to control and suppress the crowd, government through police officers set up road blocks, arrested Bersih supporters, threw tear gas and shot water cannons towards the protestors¹⁰. This Bersih movement is not being confined in Malaysia only but its effect has been spread globally and resulted in the Global Bersih movement in 38 international locations with 4003 overseas Malaysians in solidarity¹¹. The Bersih movement remarkably recorded the alive of democracy spirit among the Malaysians and showed that they are now aware of the democracy system and actively participate in self-governance.

The 13th General Election, 2013

The impact of 12th General Election and Bersih has influenced the recently held 13th General Election (GE13) on May 2013, which is another notable incident that marked the legacy of Malaysian youth democracy. In the GE13, although BN still retained the majority parliamentary seats by garnering 133 seats, it was the first time that its popular vote happened to be lower than that of Pakatan Rakyat¹². The Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Najib alleged that the lost of seats of BN is due to 'Chinese Tsunami' whereby most of the Chinese voted opposition instead. However, most of the analysts disagreed and criticized that it was 'Youth and Urban Tsunami' instead whereby the young and urban voters chose the opposition, whilst rural voters continued to support the incumbents.

The 13th General Election recorded the highest voting rate in Malaysian electoral history with a voting rate of 84.84%¹³. Among the 13.3 million of eligible registered voters, 25% which equivalent to 2.6 million of them are young first-time voters and the number is comparatively large comparing to 638000 of young voters in the 12th General Election¹⁴. The Election Commission has registered 2.4 million of first-time voters before the GE13. In a survey done by Universiti Malaya on January, it was shown that 52 percent of new voters backing opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim for prime minister, with Najib at 30%. This shows that the raise of awareness of politics

⁹ In Bersih 2.0, also known as the 'Walk for Democracy', the coalition requested for 8 demands, namely clean up of the electoral roll, reform of postal ballot, use of indelible ink, minimum 21 days of campaign period, free and fair access to mass media for all parties, strengthening of public institutions, no corruption and no dirty politics

¹⁰ Gooch, Liz (9 July 2011). *Thousands of Malaysians Rally for Changes to Elections*

¹¹ Statistic from Bersih Official Website. *Global Bersih 2.0 - The Awakening of the Malaysian Diaspora*

¹² Firdausi Suffian (14th November 2013), *Youths, politics and election in Malaysia*. In terms of popular votes, PR obtained 50.87%, higher than BN which secured only 47.38% in the election.

¹³ Sources from The Star Online (6th May 2013), *GE13: EC - Record 85% turnout; BN gets 46.5% of popular vote*

¹⁴ Siva Sithraputhran & Anuradha Raghu (29th April 2013), *Rise Of Young Voters Shifts Malaysia Election Balance*

and democracy among the youth that results in the increasing of voters and voting rate from the youth in the GE13. The young voters have no voting patterns to track from previous record, and were the most likely to be urban, having access to the internet, alternative and social media, and therefore more critical minded. The National Youth Survey claims that 73% of youths in Malaysia access the Internet every hour and 63% of them believe that the news published or twitted in the social media are somehow reliable. Hence, the political news and propaganda that being widespread in social media contributed to the maturity and awareness of the young voters on politics and democracy. Issues such as corruption, employment, rising cost of living, and escalating price of properties and high car prices are now the major concerns of the young voters, who have been known as the 'X Factor' that decides the winner of the election¹⁵.

Figure 3: Summary of the 2013 Malaysian Dewan Rakyat Election Results

	Votes	% of vote	Seats	% of seats	+/-
Barisan Nasional	5,237,986	47.38	133	59.91	▼7*
United Malays National Organization	3,252,484	29.45	88	39.84	▲9
United Traditional Bumiputera Party	232,390	2.10	14	6.31	—
Malaysian Chinese Association	867,851	7.86	7	3.15	▼6
Sarawak People's Party	59,540	0.54	6	2.70	—
Malaysian Indian Congress	286,629	2.59	4	1.80	▲1
United Sabah Party	74,959	0.68	4	1.80	▲1
Sarawak Progressive Democratic Party	55,505	0.50	4	1.80	—
United Pasokmomogun Kadazandusun Murut Organisation	53,584	0.48	3	1.35	▼1
Malaysian People's Movement Party	191,019	1.73	1	0.45	▼1
Sarawak United People's Party	133,603	1.21	1	0.45	▼5
United Sabah People's Party	9,467	0.08	1	0.45	—
Liberal Democratic Party	13,138	0.12	0	0.00	▼1
People's Progressive Party	7,530	0.07	0	0.00	—
Coalition of Opposition Parties	5,624,011	50.87	89	40.09	▲7
Democratic Action Party	1,736,601	15.71	38	17.12	▲10
People's Justice Party	2,254,211	20.39	30	13.51	▼1
Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party	1,633,199	14.77	21	9.46	▼2
Independents and others	192,890	1.75	0	0.00	—
Invalid/blank votes	173,661	—	—	—	—
Total	11,228,548	100	222	100	—
Registered voters/turnout	13,268,002	84.63	—	—	—

Meanwhile, the post-GE13 rally in Kelana Jaya that protested against the electoral fraud has shown a high level and adoption of democracy spirit as well. 120,000 protestors turned out in black in Kelana Jaya stadium supported Pakatan Rakyat and Datuk Seri Anwar in the rally. This shows that how courageous and mature Malaysian youth in 2013 by showing discontent and their disagreement towards the electoral fraud through participation in rally. On the other hand, the democratic spirit was being shown by a series of citizens' initiatives as well, i.e.

¹⁵ David CE Teh (16th May 2013), *Ethnic-based voting and young urban voters in GE13*

the PACABA (Polling Agent, Counting Agent, Barung Agent)¹⁶ initiative. Tindak Malaysia as the frontline NGO has initiated PACABA training workshops for more than 3000 volunteers in nationwide. 17 NGO's with up to 1000 volunteers have been appointed by the commission to be on duty at the polling centres. In addition, foreign observers, including 42 from ASEAN countries and secretariats are invited to observe the elections as well¹⁷. The growing number of citizen initiatives in this GE13 represents an increasingly politically aware and democratic-spirited Malaysia. Besides the voting rate and the citizens initiatives, we could observe the rise of democracy spirit among Malaysian youth through the increasing in dynamic and enthusiastic young leaders in Parliament as well. Nurul Izzah, Ong Kian Ming, Liew Chin Tong, Zairil Khir Johari and Rafizi Ramli are young leaders that symbolise intelligence, dedication and fresh ideas for Pakatan Rakyat. On the government side, we could observe Khairy Jamaluddin whose sincerity and capabilities remain to be seen as he now faces an uphill battle within the conservative and corrupt structure of his own party¹⁸. All of these young political leaders represent the voice of Malaysian youth in democracy and politics, at the same time inspired more youth to participate actively in politics by becoming role models.

CONCLUSION: PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

Before 1990s, the concept of democracy in the perspective of youth in Malaysia was merely on theory and democracy on paper. The genuine spirit of democracy has not been lived by the Malaysian youth until the *Reformasi* movement in 1998. In the era of post-*Reformasi*, the youth became more politically aware and started to understand and embrace the concept of democracy as active participation in politics and self-governance. The youths started to think independently and critically and daring to fight for their personal rights and welfare. This is clearly seen through a series of demonstrations and rallies that were actively participated by the youth. Political information and knowledge regarding democracy were being widespread in social media that dominated by the youth. This is definitely a positive sign towards the development of Malaysian youth as well as the development of nation.

However, on the opposite side, there are problems among youth that may endanger the future of Malaysia especially difficulties in upholding the democracy spirit as well as the healthy political development. Looking at the rise of young voters and participation of youth in demonstrations and rallies, a lot of them do not understand fully on the concept of politics and democracy. The youth are highly

¹⁶ PACABA is an initiative that monitors elections to ensure that it is clean and fair. Since the early 2000's, it has been a regular feature in the Malaysian polls, with Malaysians for Free and Fair Elections (Mafrel), the National Institute for Electoral Integrity (NIEI) and SibU Election Watch (SEW) as some of the earlier watchdogs that were recognised by the Election Commission in the last election.

¹⁷ Hariati Azizan (28th April 2013), *GE13: On the Election Watch*.

¹⁸ Adil Johan (7th May 2013), *Young Voters Sparking New Politics in Malaysia*.

influenced by peers and the environment, particularly the social media. The malicious political that insulted certain politicians or parties can be seen widely on social media. Social media is being abused as a tool for certain youth to find entertainment as well as increasing their fame by posting controversial political opinions. Meanwhile, most of the youths do not understand the history and political landscape of Malaysia. Their political inclination and view are often naïve and decided based on what their peers around them think. This definitely destroys the essence of democracy whereby every single individual is supposed to be politically aware and educated in order to choose the best representative that can lead and represent the society well. A lot of people especially young voters are still voting the Member of Parliament based on the parties instead of the candidate. This is a sign of immaturity of democracy in Malaysia.

On the other hand, there are a lot of youth that still choose to blind-fold themselves towards politics. Majority of them ignored politics and opined that politics has no relevance to them at all. Malaysia has 29 million of population but only 13.2 million of them registered as voters in election. Among those who are not registered, 70% of the figures are aged between 21 to 40 years old¹⁹. This is probably caused by Malaysian educational system as well as the family background of the youth. Majority of the parents or guardians forbid and discourage the youth to be actively involved in politics. There are generation gaps between the Generation X (Guardians) and Generation Y. In the opinion of Generation X, politics are dirty elements that involved money and power and should be controlled by rich people only. As a consequence, the Malaysian youth are generally politically unaware and uneducated.

In order to curb the crises that mentioned above, everything should be started from the root, i.e. Education. In Malaysian education system, there is no politics and law education no matter in primary education or secondary education. The syllabus of the history subject is generally schematic and rather redundant for the growing of political and democratic mindset of the Malaysian youth. Therefore, politics and law education should be launched in Malaysian educational system as a formal and compulsory subject in order to prepare and set the awareness on politics and democracy among the students since young. At the same time, all parties that are responsible, i.e. the Government, the Schools and Teachers, the Parents and Guardians, the NGOs, the mass media should all collaborate and cooperate with each other by living the democracy spirit genuinely. Everyone in the nation should lead by example by equipping ourselves with all the political knowledge and practice it in daily life. There is no malicious accusations or conflicts, but there are only effort from all parties in order to achieve consensus albeit the difference in ideologies and mindset, for the sake of the future and development of nation and country.

¹⁹ Kimberly Yeo (13th April 2013), *Tomorrow's vote a mystery for today's youth*.

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