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Young Voters' Participation: General Election 2013

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Abstract

In the era of globalization, public concerns on young voters' political participation is imperative. The purpose of this study is to examine three issues such as youth political participation, protest and radicalism including university students. The study of campus politics has been dominated by two paradigms which are *political maturity* and *political consciousness* to both party: *pro-Aspirasi* and *pro-Mahasiswa*. This article argues in labelling *pro-Mahasiswa* as an *anti-establishment* party and have marginalized by the *pro-Aspirasi*, well known as the *pro-government* groups because they have been contested as the leftist or radical party. We first hypothesize that political campus has a direct negative effect such as protest and demonstration or a silent protest (abstention) because the deprivation of liberty is a cost. This type of effects may be endorsed under some conditions, it may be neutral, protest, radicalism or abstain. Some studies have found that the patterns and the trends of the young people's movement since Independence has been marked with clearly outlined objectives, specifically to voice their concerns for some issues pertaining to the majority in society and in appealing to the government to address the said issues including democratization. Even though this group of people (young people) is a minority, but it is interesting to note that Malaysian young people's movement set off with peaceful demonstrations. However, the movement eventually evolved to raise incentives for new form of protest. At the end, this study provide the concepts of protest and radicalism. For this purpose, the secondary data were analysed qualitatively. It is recommended that future research on students' protest will take into account in comparing the perceptions towards the young voters' participation in the election of 2013 and 2018.

Keywords: Youth, Political Participation, Protest, Democracy, Protest.

Introduction

Political systems have encountered major changes as a result of globalization. The fall of Communist regimes was a dominant impact that mobilized the people's spirit under authoritarian rule to demand for democracy. In the Philippines, for example, the fall of then-President Marcos by his people's 1986 People Power Revolution led to the rise of democracy in the country. Under distinct situations, a similar and increasing demand for democracy occurs in Malaysia. The process of demanding for a fair and impartial democratic government rule was

triggered by the 1997 Asian financial crisis. Meanwhile, in countries such as Indonesia, the Suharto regime was successfully overthrown by the Indonesian people's strong demands and fervour for justice and democracy through successful reforms (Kasim, 2002: 12-13).

In the context of Malaysian politics, discussions on issues of freedom of assembly and freedom of speech are both interesting and contested because it is closely related to the democratic process of the country. Such discussions indirectly create tensions between civilians and conservative rulers. The concept of freedom, as constructed from Western liberalism, is still considered as irrelevant to Malaysian politics whereas the freedom of assembly and freedom of speech are subjected to Article 10 (1) (a) of the Federal Constitution. However, government restrictions and sanctions have impeded their implementation. Further restrictions are also imposed through the legislation of several acts, among them being the Internal Security Act (ISA), Official Secrets Act (OSA), Universities and University Colleges Act or Akta Universiti dan Kolej Universiti (AUKU) and the Sedition Act (Hasutan, 1948).

The political upsurge among youths to struggle for their rights has indirectly steered towards a new political phenomenon since Malaysia's independence in 1957 (Embi, 2009: 40). Such political struggle and participation are not new among youths and discussions on youth participation in Malaysia's politics can be categorized into three phases. This study has several significances; its outcome will provide an in-depth and more comprehensive understanding of the freedom of youth participation in Malaysian politics and its relationship with their struggle towards democracy. This study is aimed to: express the discussed issues with transparency and clarity in order to achieve prosperity because it is undeniable that government policies on rights and freedom in Malaysia has immensely impacted the pattern of youth political participation; create awareness about the importance of practicing the freedom of speech and political participation without any domestic restriction as a means to uphold justice; and protest government actions that contradict public and national interests.

Political Participation

Political participation is an important measure in understanding the political development of a country. Political activities are identified by a particular attribute. Based on observations, it was determined that individual political participation is based on the reactions of an individual's socio-economic background (Milbrath, 1965: 9). Moreover, socially active individuals are more politically influential than those who are apolitical. A comparison of five countries concluded that political participation, social movements and civil unions were higher in the United States and Britain than in Germany, Italy and Mexico (Almond & Verba, 1963: 261-299). Political participation is defined as the execution of political activities by the public for the purpose of influencing government policy making. Almond and Powell further added that political participation is closely related to differences in social structure based on class, geography, ideology, religion and influences of urban and rural areas (Almond and Powell, 1988: 52-55). Such political participation will indirectly become the deciding factor of government decision making.

Sidney and Nie (1972: 2-3), examined political participation in contextual differences with other writers. Their difference lies in view that public participation involving self-organized activities still influence government actions and policies and, in return, receive public and welfare benefits. Here, Sidney and Norman do not define participation in the context of supporting the government in related activities but rather to substantiate the mobilization of numerous such

participation in developed countries. This concept is meant to indicate civil societies in a country. They also discuss the types of participation through voting, campaign participation as well as the establishment of organizations equipped to influence government actions and decisions. Political participation will impact government policies on any matter and also sustain a more responsive and responsible government. Additionally, this impact will also ensure social justice, particularly in policies to abolish the evident gap between the rich and the poor from a social and economic standpoint (Verba and Norman, 1972: 5).

According to Rousseau, participation is divided into two aspects: the first is individual participation in direct decision-making and the second is government-sponsored participation as a means to protect private property and ensure the preservation of good governance. He further opined that forced political participation contradicts the basis of freedom itself. However, if forced participation ultimately brings individual social responsibility, then it should not be subjected to any legislation of individual rights even though such enforcement inevitable may result in compliance. Rousseau stated that participation could elevate individual liberty by granting an individual the freedom to be his own leader (Rousseau, 1968: 64-65).

Participation itself refers to a set of individual behaviours that together creates political behaviour within larger groups. This occurred in Malaya when certain groups and public-organized mass demonstrations and marches to demand for the independence of Malaysia as well as opposition of the creation of the Malayan Union proved that national political participation was not a foreign concept. Almond & Verba (1963: 473-486) regarded political participation as political activities in which the public exert their influence in policy making. This also relates to differences in social structure in terms of class, geography, ideology, religion and influences of urban and rural areas. Participation is best understood within the context of an individual's circumstances or environment that encourages socialization and comparisons between middle-class students (youths who are active in decision making) and working-class students (youths who are more authoritarian). Meanwhile, people of lower classes are more aggressive and remove space in the home for participating in decision making (Cotgrove, 1967: 57).

Non-participating individuals neither benefit for or from themselves; these benefits can be divided into collective and selective benefits (Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993:17). The role of political parties is to push for social mobilization towards direct or indirect involvement in politics. There are four factors that influence individual political participation, one of which is to account for the benefits of participation that will directly impact their future and wellbeing. Besides, strong variations among contesting candidates encourage individuals to vote. Individuals who actively campaign and even become party members are more likely to participate in politics. Such awareness of responsibility as well as strong belief and options increase the prospects of individual political participation (Faisal et al., 2002: 79-82).

Analysis and Discussion

Characteristics of Participation Changes in the 13th General Election

The 13th GE in May 2013 witnessed a tense fight between the Barisan Nasional (BN) and Pakatan Rakyat (PR) coalitions. Although BN narrowly won, several of its leaders, including then-Chief Minister of Johor Abdul Ghani Othman and former Chief Minister of Malacca Mohd Ali Rustam, who was defeated by PR, which won with a 2/3 majority in the states of Selangor as well as

Penang and Kelantan. DAP also gained victory with an additional 10 parliamentary seats. The following table summarizes the above results:

Table 1: Results of the 13th GE Parliamentary Seats

	PARLIAMENTARY SEATS			
	BN	PAS	DAP	PKR
12 th GE (2008)	140	23	28	31
13 th GE (2013)	133	21	38	30

Source: Election Commission, www.spr.gov.my – (25 May 2013)

Based on the above table, it is observed that BN retained its parliamentary seats despite a decline in support compared to the 12th GE. On the whole, the general public, regardless of race and class, has witnessed the need for change in the national political landscape since the 1998 Reformasi movement. This also proved that the Malaysian people, particularly youths, were highly aware about national politics. There was also an increase in the number of voters, as displayed in the following table:

Table 2: Electoral Register in 2004, 2008 and 2013

General Election	2004	2008	*2013
Number of Voters	9,756,097	10,701,054	13,105,407

*Last updated on 27th November 2012

Source: Berita. Sinar Harian, - accessed on the 10th February 2013

Youth political participation was expressed in the 13th GE when the voter turnout was 84.84 percent. This was the largest voter turnout in the history of elections in Malaysia since its independence. The change in youth behavior and thought began when the public began rejecting racial politics and uncharitable parties. The recent election results attested the strong determination to change the old political landscape for one that is new because both the youths and the urban residents were no longer constrained by longstanding attitudes and thought and, instead, advocated for peace, prosperity and public welfare, empowering them to come forward and be vocal to the extent of terms such as “urban tsunami” and “youth tsunami” (tsunami anak muda) coined after the election, paving the way for good governance and a new aspiration for the Malaysian people (Awani, 2013).

Additionally, the 13th GE was regarded as a platform for the Malaysian people to express their aspirations as both supporters and opponents in hopes of the government’s recognition of their different views and opinions. This was because in recent times, they no longer view national politics as previously thought and are hopeful that the government will not continuously remain complacent within the obsolete political environment that was both restrictive and oppressive to the people. The increased rationalism and participation of youths as well as the surge of

information technology has affected the new political landscape and those who refused to transform their outdated political ideology were stunned by the unexpected 13th GE results.

Similarly, youths with tertiary education desire for higher critical thinking in national politics. In view of the changes in the national political landscape, particularly after the 13th GE, there were several dominant factors that has influenced youth political participation; this includes dynamic individuals who were fearless in coming forward and voicing out their rights and struggles and also passive followers who indirectly participated by attending speeches and supporting election campaigns by posting banners and party emblem flags. All these activities ultimately encouraged such groups to join the voting process. In reality, youths desire for the recognition of their ideas and political participation and to not be abandoned by the government. There was the need for a medium that allowed them to better participate, influence ideas and formulate government policies. As a result, the Majlis Perundangan Pelajar Kebangsaan (MPPK) was created to recognize and appreciate youth credibility (internet source - accessed on 30 April 2013).

The role of new media was said to be highly significant in the outcome of the 13th GE results as opposed to the 12th GE results. The Internet became the most effective tool for youths and also provided an abundant space for opposition parties against BN. The existence of alternative media and websites, including party websites, and the online news portal Malaysiakini has propelled youth political participation in recent times, which consequently changed the national political landscape. The sophistication of this technology enabled all forms of convenient, accessible and free information and perspectives. There are even a small segment of youths who have become active “cybertroopers” of PR parties, including DAP, and other Malaysian groups and interact through blogs, Facebook, Twitter and other social media platforms. Additionally, the “Red Bean Army” comprises of middle-class and tertiary-educated youths who caused the opposition parties’ parliamentary seat victory in the 13th GE.

The Internet became synonymous with learned youths who bridged the communication gap between the public and the government. The fact that Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak has a Facebook account as another social platform to ease public communication with his people validates the strong influence of the Internet and how leaders themselves are committed to the efficacy of virtual technology. Also youth interaction in cyberspace has impacted their political participation and positive reception of new politics, as reflected in the 13th GE results. This substantiates the undisputed relationship between Internet usage and youth political participation in Malaysia.

Due to the expansion of technology, urban residents are generally more likely to be politically active. The 2008 arrest of blogger Raja Petra Kamarudin, who actively wrote in his blog, *Malaysia Today*, deeply affected the urban youths, particularly of Chinese and Indian heritage, and pushed them to oppose his arrest under the ISA. Raja Petra’s writings in the English language were highly influential on youths, who hailed him as a hero. Similarly, the arrest of Adam Adli in May 2013 for his involvement in delivering speeches against the 13th GE results, which he surmised to be non-transparent and unjust, witnessed an outpouring of support from Malay, Chinese and Indian activists who joined him in Jinjang Prison. Among the activists who protested his arrest in solidarity and support of him included the Solariditi Anak Muda Malaysia (SAMM), opposition coalition activists, students, the Malaysia Youth and Students Democratic Movement (*Gerakan Demokratik Belia dan Pelajar Malaysia* or DEMA) as well as DAP activists.

The election campaigns of contending political parties illustrates the frustrations of the Malaysian people, encompassing numerous economic, political and social issues. The history of Malaysia's political development, with its propensity for racial politics, has devoided the nation of fostering the true meaning of democracy and, later, new politics. This is because change is only apparent when there are triggering factors on major issues and economic conditions that eventually increases public awareness, especially among youths.

New politics is said to have been ingrained after the May 13 1969 incident which saw the transformation of the national political landscape over disparities and economic constraints. However, the Reformasi movement was triggered by the dismissal of then-Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim, who then became a proponent for justice. Subsequently, the growth of NGOs enabled them to become a vital conduit for youth political participation by providing the latter with the space to engage with the government. NGOs took on a more fearless and vocal role in demanding the repeal of the ISA, the Printing Presses and Publications Act 1984 and other acts that suppressed the freedom of people which, in turn, formed an active and uncompromising youth participation. Individuals such as Adam Adli, a student activist who brought down a flag depicting Najib's image in 2011 to reclaim academic liberty, proved that youth participation should not be disregarded. In fact, his gesture was accompanied by 350 UPSI students who gathered from the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (*Suruhanjaya Hak Asasi Manusia* or SUHAKAM) and later marched to PWTC while chanting for freedom and space, especially the abolishment of the suppressive AUKU.

Meanwhile, the 2011 BERSIH 2.0 rally was the first rally held since its precedent in 2007. A. Samad Said, the national poet laureate who participated in the rally, called for youths to actively participate and transform the national political landscape so it can be governed by a leader who is just and upholds social wellbeing. The Malaysian people's struggles were continuously increasing until the follow-up BERSIH 3.0 rally was held in 2012. Fully endorsed by PR, this rally was deemed illegal even though it impacted nation politics on a large scale. The rally's chairperson, Ambiga Sreenevasan, demanded the current government for a fairer and more transparent election system. Her other demands included a 21-day campaign period, the use of permanent ink during election polls, reforming the postal voting system and other electoral reforms in Malaysia.

Upon examination of the voter registration system across several countries, there are clear distinctions in the execution and transparency of the systems. For example, in the United States, voter registration is conducted throughout the year and the voting age is 18. Meanwhile, in the states of New Hampshire, Idaho, Maine, Minnesota, Wisconsin and Wyoming, citizens can vote the same day they register as voters. Permanent voter registration is also performed by NGO-run campaigns (www.epicproject.org - accessed, 2013).

Meanwhile in Singapore, under Section 5 of the Parliamentary Elections Act, all citizens over 21 are eligible to register as voters. However, it is not mandatory for citizens to register as voters. The revision process for Singaporean citizens who have registered as voters is made after a media announcement for the purpose of making changes to registration and others, including transfer matters (www.epicproject.org-accessed, 2013).

The voting system in other countries such as India is more convenient to its citizens; upon reaching 18 years, citizens are eligible and are automatically registered as voters, except for those who are mentally ill. Any update of personal data or other specific information can be done

through campaigns that are occasionally organized and performed from house to house (www.epicproject.org- accessed, 2013). Based on the earlier mentioned procedures in other countries, the voter registration system in Malaysia identifies the most appropriate methods to encourage public participation, particularly of youths, in the election process and selection of leadership that will best lead Malaysia into a successful future under democracy. The EC is the responsible body that prepares electoral register and validates an individual's eligibility to vote in upcoming elections, after which it is documented in the Register of Electors (*Daftar Pemilih Induk* or DPI). This achieves the demand by youths in the BERSIH 2.0 rally for transparency.

The BERSIH 2.0 and 3.0 rallies is not only regarded as the demands of the people for a fairer and democratic election process but is also viewed as the struggle, demand and voice of the youths as the future decision makers of the country (http://www./bersih_2.0_rally- accessed on 7 November 2012). This mass rally was also attended by a youth association called the Malaysia Youth and Students Democratic Movement (DEMA), which called on all people to maintain their momentum in ensuring the fulfillment of the eight pledges made during the 13th GE, including the appointment of an international body to monitor the entire electoral process (Demamalaysia – accessed, 2012).

This peaceful demonstration calling for justice and democracy in the election process signified the increasing youth participation (Nor, 2011: 83). Despite their struggle to overcome numerous obstacles, the BERSIH rally have profoundly impacted the government to account for equality and impartiality of all Malaysians. Similarly, the media clampdown and growing bribery cases over the Lynas plant issues was not neglected.

Following a shift of power that led to the resignation of then-Prime Minister, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, Najib brought a new paradigm of Malaysian politics that emphasized on unity. In his administration, he focused more on youths as a key entity in the foundation of a civil society and community that would pave the direction of national politics towards the 13th GE. As such, the government made several efforts from the grassroots to reach out to youths, particularly students, in order to come out with new form of idealism and ideas that would guide Malaysia towards democracy. For instance, the Ministry of Higher Education (*Kementerian Pengajian Tinggi* or KPT) gathered students from 20 universities in order to gain insight and engage in dialogue; this was called "Driving the Youth's Mind" or 3M for short (Abdullah, 2013- accessed on 15 February 2013). Several other programs were founded by Najib, such as 1Malaysia Youth For You (1M4U), as a means of bringing together youths and the community and directly engaging with them by volunteering in activities and with NGOs for national development and progress (Bernama, 2013).

In general, corruption, cronyism, nepotism, money politics and abuse of power have indirectly created negative perceptions in voters, mainly because during election polls, voters are influenced by the credibility and accountability of individual leaders. Thus, the above issues have been continuously debated and even manifested into protests and rallies to show their condemnation, which the opposition figures have highlighted in election campaigns. It is imperative to note that despite constant efforts by Najib's administration, there still exist weaknesses in confronting these issues at the grassroot level by relevant parties. The case of the BN leader Shahzizat Abdul Jalil's involvement with the National Feedlot Corporation (NFC), for example, led to the dissemination, debate and discussion of this issue in blogs, Facebook, Twitter

and other media channels, which ultimately tarnished her reputation as a respected politician and impacted youth perception in the 13th GE.

Youth Participation in the Aftermath of the 13th General Elections

Based on observations from the data, the youths' struggle for democracy and a new political landscape was not reflected in the 13th GE. Nevertheless, it is still ongoing because citizens still perceive that the 13th GE process was both implausible and flawed; this has only further sparked interest in youths. This was prompted by the fact that during the election polls, there were alleged incidences of fraudulent voting, blackouts during ballot counting and many more.

The opposition coalition's "Suara Rakyat Suara Keramat" gathering held at Kelana Jaya on 8th May 2013, three days after the 13th GE, saw 100,000 attendees, including youths, of all races and age. This infers that the struggle for public participation in the current era of globalization has transcended ethnic and age divisions. Youth participation in such events, whether attended as an individual or under organizations such as Solidariti Anak Muda Malaysia (SAMM), the tens of thousands of attendees who protested the EC's deceit of permanent ink use in the election also demanded for the EC to face the court of law, re-election in selected constituencies and enforcement of justice.

Following the "Suara Rakyat Suara Keramat" gathering, there was a series of rallies known as Blackout 505, totalling the number of rallies to 8. This excludes the main rally on 26th May 2013 in Petaling Jaya Square that was attended by almost 50,000 people. According to researchers, this rally was also attended by activists who previously shocked the nation such as the youth activist K.S. Bhavani, whose denial of freedom of speech resulted in a viral video, Ekhsan Bukharee and student activist Safwan Anang.

The Malaysian people continued their dissent in a series of ongoing rallies, beginning with the #622 rally in Padang Merbok, Kuala Lumpur on 22nd June 2013. Youths, including students, make up the majority of protesters at the forefront and those who camped at the location; two days later, they even made their way to the Parliament and lied down on a nearby road in protest. The youths and students were headed by the Youths of Justice (*Angkatan Muda Keadilan* or AMK) and their protests together with youth activists, Adam Adli and Safwan Anang, embodied active youth political participation that transcended race and class sentiments as opposed to previous struggles that only occurred within respective race interests. On the day before the rally, youths even spearheaded the flashmob finale and marched across the city to show their support and promote rally participation at Padang Merbok the following day. Although a segment of them were merely followers, their black attire expressed their support. This rally was a follow-up of the previous rally demanding the resignation of the EC Chairman, Deputy Chairman and panel members (Rahman, 2013).

Conclusion

This study on the 13th GE results held in 2013 was aimed to analyze and identify the voting pattern of the Malaysian public, particularly among youths. Based on the results presented above, it was found that there is a change in the voting pattern of non-static youths. After the political tsunami in the 12th GE, the voting pattern of youths moved away from BN, which has won every GE, and towards other parties. Increased awareness is a major factor and cause for the prevalent youth participation and its impact in the GE results because youths have become the predominant

agents of change in the national political landscape. Their voting process in the 13th GE has shown to transcend racial and religious boundaries in favour of the opposition parties, overlooking the contesting candidates themselves. This “political tsunami” of the 13th GE caused BN to suffer its worst defeat in its history; DAP was victorious over BN’s Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) parties and became a dominant representative for Chinese-Malaysians. The support received by DAP, PKR and PAS was intended to form a better and more transparent governance compared to BN’s 55 years of governance. This support was why BN struggled for its victory in the 13th GE and has a precarious path to cross for the upcoming 14th GE.

With regard to the theory of voting behaviour, the identification of a party is regarded as a relevant element in the 12th and 13th GEs. However, as discussed above, it is rationalism that determines the voting pattern of youths across several regions. It is unlikely that the country’s administration will transfer if they were strongly supported by veterans. Instead, it is more likely to be the youths’ support for the actualization of aspirations and wellbeing of all citizens. Nonetheless, it is obvious that youths have become more vocal and aware of the ruling government in order to better appreciate and protect the fate of the Malaysian people through the eradication of corruption, abuse of power, cronyism and nepotism as well embezzlement for the betterment of the country. It is youths who are furnished with the mission and determination to free their beloved country from unlawful leaders and leadership and progress towards true democracy.

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