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Undi18: Youth Vote Only Part of Story

By Meredith L. Weiss

SYNOPSIS

Malaysia's move to extend the franchise to youths aged 18–21 is significant, but is unlikely to have a strong liberalising effect. Several initiatives within civil society illustrate how much more there is to youth political participation than voting.

COMMENTARY

THIS MONTH, at the start of 2022, Malaysia's government is set finally to implement 'Undi18' ('Vote18'), a constitutional amendment that parliament passed in 2019 with unprecedented bipartisan support. The change will enfranchise several million new young voters. Iconic scenes of brave young people from across Asia, championing democracy and resisting authoritarianism, foster an impression of youth as natural liberals – giving rise to speculation that this expansion of the suffrage could push Malaysian politics sharply leftward.

Reality is far more complicated, as Malaysian experience demonstrates well. Malaysian youth do have a long history of activism, either as youth or students, peaking in the 1960s-70s, or as citizens, including as part of Reformasi protests in the 1990s or the Bersih movement more recently. Much of that activism has been for left-wing or 'progressive' causes – but not all.

Voting: 2018 and Beyond

Young Malaysians are as divided in ideological and partisan terms as their elders. Elections may not be the most germane place to look for signs of youth-led liberalisation – but voting is also not the only political participation that matters.

At least as important are initiatives designed to heighten youths' and other citizens'

sense of political efficacy and create space for critical discourse and engagement. Such efforts foster habits of political participation conducive to democratic praxis.

In Malaysia's pivotal 2018 elections, voters under 40 posted the lowest support for the Barisan Nasional (National Front, BN) coalition – ousted from federal power for the first time since independence. Yet, they were hardly united in support for Pakatan Harapan (Alliance of Hope, PH), the reformist coalition that won. A significantly higher share of younger than older Malay voters backed Parti Islam seMalaysia (PAS) instead, suggesting support for an Islamist and Malay-oriented rather than 'progressive', noncommunal political vision.

Indeed, by the time PH collapsed in early 2020, the generation gap had narrowed; young Bumiputera (Malays and other indigenous groups) outpolled their elders in support for the new 'Malay-unity' Perikatan Nasional administration. That demographic trends render Malays increasingly numerically dominant will surely magnify these electoral turns, especially as younger voters gain the franchise. This could dramatically reshape electoral patterns.

It may well be that 20-something MP Syed Saddiq Syed Abdul Rahman's new Malaysian United Democratic Alliance, or MUDA (Youth), is a harbinger of a sharper turn toward noncommunal, progressive politics among Malay youth.

But if, for instance, the prolonged pandemic leaves young Malays ever more reliant on preferential policies and secure civil-service careers, past experience suggests they may be more inclined to support UMNO and its allies, as a presumed-dependable conduit to those benefits. Or if frustration with corruption further inclines youth toward political Islam, PAS could be the real kingmaker.

In short, Undi18 will surely matter for electoral outcomes – but not necessarily for advancing noncommunal politics or significant institutional reform.

Political Activism

Regardless, youth political activism extends beyond voting. Today's youth came of age amid expanded avenues for awareness-raising and mobilisation, and of prominent, lively mass movements around core political positions and identities, from free-and-fair elections to Islamism.

Regardless of their ideological or policy preferences, Malaysian youth are thus acculturated to new ways of approaching politics, making it more likely that they develop and model new habits of participation and enforcing accountability. It is in this sort of activism-beyond-elections, then, that we might see how Malaysian youth are changing politics – regardless of whether or how they vote.

Youth demonstrate increasing predilection for informal 'civic' rather than more formal partisan participation. Among these initiatives are familiar, if still unconventional, undertakings such as boycotts and street demonstrations. Youths have also issued election demands and backed supportive candidates. Particularly important long-term are a subset of lower-key endeavours around political education and socialization.

These initiatives have been underway for some time, expanding since the 2008 elections. Political parties themselves have organized some, as have non-governmental organizations: varieties of discussion sessions, internship programmes, and similar opportunities, focused less on recruiting new members than on simply engaging youth.

Groups of (mostly) young people themselves have also found creative ways to inform, motivate, and empower Malaysians, especially youths, toward more active citizenship. In the process, they prepare the ground for longer-term democratization in Malaysia.

Three Notable Projects

Three such projects are especially notable both in their own right, and for what they model: the civic education-oriented Youth in Politics (*YPolitics*); Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia's (Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement, *ABIM*) ideological innovation; and the institutional-reform-focused Institute for Political Reform and Democracy (*Reform*).

YPolitics:

Among a set of projects for critical historiography and civic education sits *YPolitics*. Initiatives around the time of Reformasi jumpstarted these efforts; they have deepened and diversified since. Critical historiography may be invaluable for reframing citizens' relationship to their polity. *YPolitics* picks up that thread, defining itself as, 'a multi-partisan and independent youth-led movement that aims to generate a more politically aware Malaysian youth'.

Since its launch in June 2020, *YPolitics* has focused in particular on producing a series of punchy, informative, and accessible issue backgrounders, circulated on social media. Each presents clear explanation, key data, pithy critiques of current praxis and debates, and, where appropriate, personal action steps.

Topics have included everything from climate change, to the government's response to Covid-19, to public finance, to sexual harassment. Even when the booklets touch on partisan politics, their goal is plainly to explain, not to persuade. In the process, these efforts take advantage of existing public space to foster better informed, empowered citizens.

ABIM:

The pedigree of *ABIM* is much longer, dating back to the rise of *dakwah* activism in the early 1970s. Not for the first time, *ABIM* has taken on ideological reform – now swimming *against* what would seem a propitious tide for political Islam. *ABIM* is championing 'cosmopolitan' Islamism and multiculturalism, espousing a *Bangsa Malaysia*, or Malaysian (rather than Malay) nation – historically a trope associated with non-Malay Malaysians.

This focus for *ABIM* is part of a larger emphasis it shares with a cluster of fellow youth organisations on civic education to communicate a particular vision for the country – one of unity and cohesion rather than partisan tension.

This inclusive emphasis echoes earlier phases in which *ABIM* (and *PAS*) rhetoric emphasised socioeconomic justice, moderation, and tolerance; *ABIM* leaders also

note their alignment with shifts among the Muslim Brotherhood and Brotherhood-linked Islamist groups globally. ABIM presents this agenda as preparing Malaysia effectively for inclusive governance and effective policymaking.

Reform:

Finally, we consider youth-directed efforts at building institutional capacity for democratic governance. A surge in institutional-reform initiatives helped propel PH into office; some continue still. **Reform** fits squarely among them. Launched in early 2019 as a nonpartisan advocacy group, Reform targets constitutional literacy, education about democracy, parliamentary research, and advocacy, for both politicians and the general public (especially youth, women, and rural communities).

Unlike many peer organisations, Reform operates mostly in Malay, expanding its reach. Such an initiative is particularly important to democratisation for its emphasis on making sure systems work as they should, and that young people in particular understand those mechanics.

Longer-Term Shifts

Taken together, these patterns and programmes recommend attention to longer-term shifts in political socialisation, beyond short-term partisan permutations. This emphasis is not to understate or undervalue young people's contributions to Malaysian electoral politics: to strengthening political parties, to get-out-the-vote efforts, to creative initiatives to detect electoral malfeasance and hold legislators accountable.

Yet for liberalisation to take deep root requires more than just successful elections. It requires a commitment to participation, civic awareness and access to policy information, and appreciation for core democratic principles. It is at these deeper levels that the sorts of initiatives profiled here work, sowing seeds rather than reaping harvests of democratisation.

Its youth are helping to ensure that Malaysia emerges over time better positioned for democratised governance, as rising cohorts expect more than the illiberal status quo.

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