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# **CAN YOUTH SAVE MALAYSIA'S DEMOCRACY?**

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## **Abstract**

In 2019, Malaysia passed a bipartisan constitutional amendment that lowered the country's voting age from 21 to 18, setting in train a dramatic expansion of the electorate and downward tilt in the median voter age. Malaysian youth are, on average, both fairly well informed and politically aware, and concerned about their country's direction and their own prospects. Yet we should *not* expect that a sudden flood of young voters will upend Malaysia's next elections. Like their elders, not all youth share the same priorities or are committed to a similar democratic vision. Especially key are differing perspectives on the role of race and religion in government, and on the ethno-nationalist coalition that came to power in early 2020, supplanting the reformist coalition elected in 2018. Nevertheless, elections are not the only way youth can make their mark on Malaysian democracy. Today's youth came of age in an era of expanded avenues for awareness-raising and mobilisation. Regardless of personal ideological or policy preferences, Malaysian youth are thus more likely acculturated to new ways of approaching and engaging in politics, positioning them to develop and model new habits of participation and enforcing accountability — habits conducive to more robust, if incremental, liberalisation.

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Waves of protests in recent years in Hong Kong, Indonesia, Thailand, Myanmar and elsewhere give the impression of unequivocal, powerful, pro-democratic sentiment among youth. In Malaysia, too, a pivotal election in 2018 seemed to validate that sense of a region-wide phenomenon: youth were among the most vocal and visible activists for change, and voters under 40 posted the lowest support for the (ousted) Barisan Nasional (National Front, BN) coalition. The new Pakatan Harapan (Alliance of Hope, PH) government's collapse less than two years later not only upturned politics, but also encouraged re-evaluation of what had really happened in 2018, of what space remained for "progressive" (reform-oriented, less-communal) initiatives, and of where youth in particular really stood. Indeed, that experience recommends against reading political attitudes, regardless of age cohort, from the slogans shouted most loudly, pro-democratic or otherwise.

The evidence suggests that Malaysian youth are not *the* ready answer to Malaysia's electoral woes. As detailed below, ideologically and in partisan terms, Malaysian youth are as divided as their elders. But youth are still critically important to political change, beyond short-term electoral fluctuations, especially in cultivating new political sensibilities and initiatives pitched to influence not just their peers, but also society as a whole. It is those efforts that stand to shift the foundations of Malaysian politics over time towards liberalisation, even if electoral change lags. Such liberalisation entails active political participation, attention to policy outcomes, and a policy process open to input and scrutiny. It is on such dimensions, which cut across ideological orientations, that I focus here in arguing for an unconventional lens on democratisation and youth politics.

In this paper, I explore why we should not expect the sort of full-throated pursuit of progressive politics the literature and media so often presume to be endemic among youths, and why it is this generation that, nevertheless, *is* nudging Malaysia towards a more liberal future. The paper begins, though, with an important structural constraint on what Malaysian youth actually *can* do — the limited franchise — then explains why rectifying that alone may have only marginal impact. It then delves into a series of youth-led or youth-oriented initiatives and their import. The paper concludes by assessing the implications of current patterns for both Malaysian democracy and the place of youth in it.

## **The Youth Vote(-To-Be)**

Until today, a key reason young Malaysians have not convincingly tipped the electoral scales is that so many of them have not been able to vote: the voting age is still 21. In 2019, during PH's brief rule, Malaysia passed its first-ever unanimously approved constitutional amendment (dubbed *Undi18*, or *Vote18*), to lower the country's voting age to 18. Malaysia has been a global outlier, as one of only 10 countries still to restrict voting to citizens 21 and older. And that, in a county with a decided youth bulge: the median age in Malaysia is a spry 29.2 (versus an average age among politicians of 55).<sup>1</sup> This change is deeply consequential: at one stroke, it will enfranchise an estimated 3.8 million new

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<sup>1</sup> Crystal Teoh, "Youth Moving to the Forefront of Malaysian Politics", *The Diplomat*, 15 September 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/09/youth-moving-to-the-forefront-of-malaysian-politics/>.

voters, aged 18–21 — a stunning increase from the 14.9 million citizens registered to vote in 2018. (A provision in the same legislation for automatic registration of voters will instantly enfranchise another 4 million citizens aged above 21.)<sup>2</sup> Undi18 represents surely the superlative example, too, of how youth have influenced policy: young people advocated strenuously, first, for the amendment’s passage, then for its implementation.

That said, while the next general election (“GE15”) is not due until 2023, speculation has been rife that it might be held earlier, and the Perikatan Nasional (National Alliance, PN) government now in power has delayed enacting Undi18. Even though the law finally came into effect on 15 December 2021, two weeks ahead of a court-imposed deadline, the time required for full implementation may mean that those millions of youth will *not* yet be registered to vote by GE15. If Malaysian youth, especially towards the younger end of that category, hope to change the political system, doing so through elections might still not be a viable option for some years to come — perhaps not until the cohort that comes of age in time for GE16, that is, around 2028.

## A divided youth electorate

Nonetheless, even if the election commission’s wheels were to start whirling, we should *not* expect that a sudden flood of 18–21 year-old voters would upend Malaysia’s next elections. The most plausible reason for why the Undi18 amendment passed is that all parties assumed *they* would benefit: that they would win those youth votes. And all are probably correct, to an extent. One might assume that, especially in a country already edging towards reform, however fitfully, an influx of young voters might tip the scales towards faster, deeper liberalisation. Such a conclusion would be, at best, premature in Malaysia.

Suffrage aside, not all Malaysian youth share the same priorities or are committed to a democratic vision. However disinclined they were to support BN in 2018, youth (21+) were not united behind PH, as Table 1 makes clear; Parti Islam Se Malaysia (PAS) drew higher support among younger than older voters. Younger citizens also voted at slightly lower than average levels.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, while we do see a generation gap in attitudes, especially as of the 2018 elections, that gap was narrower and proved largely ephemeral among Malays.<sup>4</sup> Especially key are differing perspectives on the role of race and religion in government, and on the ethno-nationalist coalition that came to power in early 2020 through a parliamentary/palace coup, ousting the reformist PH. PN’s coalition government, now in its

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<sup>2</sup> Department of Statistics Malaysia, “Current Population Estimates, Malaysia, 2020”, [https://www.dosm.gov.my/v1/index.php?r=column/cthemeByCat&cat=155&bul\\_id=OVByWjg5YkQ3MWFZRTN5bDJiaEVhZz09&menu\\_id=L0pheU43NWJwRWVVSZklWdzQ4TlhUUT09](https://www.dosm.gov.my/v1/index.php?r=column/cthemeByCat&cat=155&bul_id=OVByWjg5YkQ3MWFZRTN5bDJiaEVhZz09&menu_id=L0pheU43NWJwRWVVSZklWdzQ4TlhUUT09); Malaysian Election Commission, “Soalan-soalan lazim: Mengenai penurunan umur pengundi dan calon serta pendaftaran pemilih secara automatic”, [https://www.spr.gov.my/sites/default/files/FAQ%20RUU%20PERLEMBAGAAN%20%28PINDAAN%29%202019\\_%20AUTO%2018.pdf](https://www.spr.gov.my/sites/default/files/FAQ%20RUU%20PERLEMBAGAAN%20%28PINDAAN%29%202019_%20AUTO%2018.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Ibrahim Suffian and Lee Tai De, “How Malaysia Voted in 2018”, in *Toward a New Malaysia? The 2018 Election and Its Aftermath*, ed. Meredith L. Weiss and Faisal S. Hazis (Singapore: NUS Press, 2020), 29.

<sup>4</sup> Ibrahim Suffian, Ted Lee, and Meredith Weiss, “Malaysia’s Democratic Deficit — Why Youth Don’t Seem to Mind” (paper presented at American Political Science Association annual meeting, Seattle, 1 October 2021).

second iteration, is decidedly shaky. It operated for much of 2021 under emergency rule, with parliament suspended, ostensibly due to Covid-19, but, critics charge, also to allow Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin to sidestep a likely vote of confidence in the wake of MP defections. Even so, the coalition enjoys strong support among *Bumiputera* (Malay-Muslim and other indigenous) voters — including youths.

**Table 1. Electoral support (%) among youth versus voters of all ages, peninsular Malaysia, 2018 (2013)**

Age cohort	BN	PH*	PAS*	Turnout
21—29	27.7 (44.7)	45.5 (54.3)	26.3	80.1 (84.0)
30—39	27.2 (42.6)	51.1 (56.4)	21.0	80.3 (84.3)
All ages	30.7 (44.7)	49.3 (54.4)	19.3	82.1 (84.9)

\* In 2013, PH, then known as Pakatan Rakyat, included PAS.

Malaysian youth are fairly upbeat, on the whole: Merdeka Center research in mid-2020<sup>5</sup> found that a majority felt themselves better off than their parents in terms of education, standard of living, job security and other indicators, and three-fourths believed that “hard work and talent”, not their backgrounds or parents, would determine their fates. (Worth noting: the pre-pandemic youth unemployment rate was over three times the overall rate.<sup>6</sup>) That said, 82% thought “the right connections” had helped them in their working life and 80% saw a “big” gap between social classes in Malaysia.

But younger Malaysians remain less critical politically, too. Another Merdeka Center survey, this one from December 2020,<sup>7</sup> found that only 36% (all ages) thought the country to be going in the right direction (versus fully half who thought the reverse), although the federal government rated better: 58% were happy with its performance. Malays were most sanguine: 49% thought the country was on track, in stark contrast to only 14% of Chinese Malaysians. But notably for present purposes, the youngest respondents (21–30 years old) reported the highest level of satisfaction with the federal government (60%). Those numbers surprisingly *improved* through repeated pandemic lockdowns and economic stress. As of March 2021, 46% of survey respondents aged 18–30 thought Malaysia was going in the right direction; 42% disagreed, most commonly faulting politics.<sup>8</sup>

Disaggregated data offer clues as to why these numbers are so. Bumiputera report radically higher satisfaction levels with the PN government than other Malaysians do (see Table 2, for data with

<sup>5</sup> Merdeka Center, “Youth and Malaysian Social Mobility” (unpublished presentation, 2020).

<sup>6</sup> The percentages in 2019 were 11.8% for ages 15–24 versus 3.3% overall. World Bank, drawing on International Labour Organization data, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.1524.ZS?locations=MY>; and <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.TOTL.NE.ZS?locations=MY>.

<sup>7</sup> Merdeka Center, “Update on Malaysian Political Dynamics” (unpublished presentation, 7 January 2021, 6, 8–9).

<sup>8</sup> Keertan Ayamany, “Is Malaysian Politics Heading in the Right Direction? Youth Are Pretty Much Split Down the Middle, According to New Survey”, *Malay Mail*, 8 May 2021, <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2021/05/08/is-malaysia-heading-in-the-right-direction-youth-are-pretty-much-split-down/1972620>.

memories of the “coup” still fresh in the minds of respondents).<sup>9</sup> Likewise, rural and East Malaysian (heavily Bumiputera) respondents overall reported far higher levels of satisfaction with the government and prime minister than did other respondents. The same was true of the poorest respondents (with household incomes under RM2,000 a month), with satisfaction levels declining consistently as income increases.<sup>10</sup> Given differential birth-rates (over twice as high for Malays as for Chinese<sup>11</sup>), the youth population skews towards a higher proportion who are Bumiputera than in the population overall — meaning more of this cohort than of others may be from rural or peri-urban areas and may have lower household incomes.<sup>12</sup>

**Table 2. Support for PN federal government (%), May 2020**

	<b>Below 40</b>	<b>Above 40</b>
Malay	87.9	86.9
Chinese	18.2	14.3
Indian	55.9	51.9
Muslim Bumiputera	80.0	80.0
Non-Muslim Bumiputera	78.6	54.8
<i>Overall</i>	<i>68.8</i>	<i>57.8</i>

All things considered, Bumiputera (especially Malay) voters have a stronger stake than do other Malaysians in the pre-2018 (and post-2020) status quo. A Malay-centric, communally structured government, which is what the BN and now PN-plus<sup>13</sup> regimes were and are, works to their favour. Even as corruption allegations in particular turned the electoral tide against the BN and its dominant partner, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), in the 2000s, those patterns were notably, and understandably, uneven among youth. In 2013, for instance, Chiok Phaik Fern’s field research in heavily agricultural Perlis state found young voters inclined towards UMNO-linked associations “to secure training and financial support” for initiatives in agriculture or fishing, as well as towards BN-aligned business and NGO networks, especially in areas with young *padi* (rice) growers and fishers.<sup>14</sup> As she explains, voters had to choose between an emphasis on equitable development, which the opposition coalition (then represented by PAS) promised, or development policies skewed towards their own benefit. The demographic shift towards Malays has not seemed to temper those alignments; the issue is less a perceived cultural or economic challenge from the Chinese than the fact of benefits tied to Bumiputera ethnicity.

<sup>9</sup> Suffian, Lee, and Weiss, “Malaysia’s Democratic Deficit”, 11.

<sup>10</sup> Merdeka Center, “Update”, 9.

<sup>11</sup> Tey Nai Peng, “Bracing for Low Fertility in Malaysia”, *ISEAS Perspective*, 13 April 2020, 2–3.

<sup>12</sup> Muhammed Abdul Khalid and Li Yang, “Income Inequality and Ethnic Cleavages in Malaysia: Evidence from Distributional National Accounts (1984–2014)”, World Inequality Database, Working Paper. No. 2019/09, <https://wid.world/document/9231/>.

<sup>13</sup> The current governing coalition includes BN and PN as separate sub-alliances, rather than united as they were initially, as well as East Malaysian partners.

<sup>14</sup> Chiok Phaik Fern, “Arau, Perlis: The Irresistible Charm of Warlords, Women and Rewards?”, in *Electoral Dynamics in Malaysia: Findings from the Grassroots*, ed. Meredith L. Weiss (Kuala Lumpur: SIRD, and Singapore: ISEAS, 2014), 29–30.

Again, too, a “progressive” alternative is not the only one available. About one-third of Malay voters supported PAS in the last election — and, having aligned with both UMNO and PN, PAS is now in the federal government. Although PAS has joined social-justice-oriented coalitions in the past, its emphasis is on Islamism — which Malaysian demographics renders also communal — not political liberalism. Dominik Müller finds that in the late 1990s, and somewhat episodically thereafter, PAS did seem open to compromising strategically on, or at least deemphasising, its Islamist policy objectives and convictions for the sake of gaining the ability to win, and hence to change the state from within. However, party members remained divided; many still focused on Islamic statehood and legislation, even as PAS assimilated into a non-Islamist coalition.<sup>15</sup> For its part, PAS Youth grew more accepting of pop-cultural influences — most notably, Muslim rock musicians who support its “Islamic struggle” (*perjuangan Islam*) and can help with outreach (*dakwah*) — but this “cultural popisation” is combined with a “classical Islamist mission”.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, some younger PAS members, frustrated with the party’s inconsistent adherence to Islamist priorities, left the party after the 2008 elections, when PAS joined the Pakatan Rakyat coalition with Anwar Ibrahim’s Parti Keadilan Rakyat (People’s Justice Party, PKR) and the Chinese-based Democratic Action Party, DAP.<sup>17</sup> Their “renewed passion” for “state-oriented political Islamism” contrasted with PAS senior members’ greater “political pragmatism”.<sup>18</sup>

Lack of exit polls hampers firm conclusions about who votes how in Malaysia, though organisation of voters into age-demarcated *saluran* (channels) at polling stations offers insight at least into patterns by age. Those data, as well as qualitative assessment, allow us to conclude that the Malaysian youth vote is less bimodal than has been common in Malaysia, given greater support for an Islamist alternative — an alternative overwhelmingly oriented towards the Malay majority. Indeed, PAS took the majority among youths, as among voters overall, in its east-coast heartland.<sup>19</sup> Time will tell how stable those preferences are and what they represent: whether today’s youth “outgrow” their current leanings or retain them as older adults, whether Islamism remains disproportionately popular among the youth of the day, and where PAS comes to sit along Malaysia’s partisan/ideological spectrum. But the point remains that we should not look to youth for a markedly “progressive” vote.

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<sup>15</sup> Dominik M. Müller, “Post-Islamism or Pop-Islamism? Ethnographic Observations of Muslim Youth Politics in Malaysia”, *Paideuma: Mitteilungen zur Kulturkunde* 59 (2013): 266–67.

<sup>16</sup> Müller, “Post-Islamism or Pop-Islamism?”, 272.

<sup>17</sup> Müller, “Post-Islamism or Pop-Islamism?” 275.

<sup>18</sup> Müller, “Post-Islamism or Pop-Islamism?”, 280.

<sup>19</sup> Suffian and Lee, “How Malaysia Voted in 2018”, 38.

## Grounds for Optimism

Importantly, though, youth political activism has extended well beyond voting, taking on new forms since the Reformasi movement of the late 1990s, and especially with the rise of social media and new online forums.<sup>20</sup> Voter mobilisation seeks short-term payoffs; other efforts promote changes in attitudes and behaviour in the medium to long term — though these tracks overlap. Lack of civic education or felt political efficacy, notwithstanding “feelings of deprivation and injustice”, has tended to discourage “mainstream” political participation.<sup>21</sup> Still, a recent survey of over 5,000 Malaysian youths, aged 15–25, found higher levels of “civic” participation. Fewer contacted politicians, participated in party events, and otherwise tried to influence decision makers than in other developing countries. However, on average, youth did engage actively as citizens, such as by discussing current issues or through charity work or recycling.<sup>22</sup> Also, a slightly greater share of young people than their elders join labour unions (16.1% vs. 14.4%) or participate in other “cause-oriented” or “unconventional” political activities, such as signing petitions, joining boycotts or attending demonstrations.<sup>23</sup> “They are not dropping out completely from politics”, explains Norhafiza Mohd Hed, but choosing “low-risk unconventional channels like online activism, popular cultural representations and informal political discussion” over “elite-directed or elite-challenging political activism”.<sup>24</sup>

Seeing a niche, both government and opposition parties have homed in on civic and political education and internships, beyond mobilising voters.<sup>25</sup> Suggests Haris Zuan, new programmes “aim to empower youth by exposing them to political ideas and understanding” that are focused less on “party propaganda” than simply the chance to “engage”.<sup>26</sup> Those efforts swelled after the 2008 elections. Notably, while some of these initiatives *have* shaped voting behaviour and even propelled youths into office, most participants in party-run political-education efforts have *not* joined the parties in question.<sup>27</sup> Nor, for that matter, can one yet discern a substantial effect on those parties’ leaderships, policies or priorities in line with these new strategies.

Even before the 2018 elections, though, the constituency for partisan engagement had been widened by reforms that had progressively loosened the strictures preventing political activity by undergraduates. PH, BN and PAS actively courted youth voters with targeted promises and a bumper

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<sup>20</sup> An important caveat: Malaysia’s policy process remains largely top-down and opaque. That youth initiatives have not translated readily into policy outcomes, liberalising or otherwise, thus should not unduly discount their salience.

<sup>21</sup> Norhafiza Mohd Hed, “The Dynamics of Youth Political Participation in Southeast Asia: The Case of Malaysia” (dissertation, University of Sheffield, 2017), 250–51, 55.

<sup>22</sup> A. Salman, A. R. Samsudin, and F. Yusuf, “Civic and Political Participation: A Study of Marginalised and Mainstream Youth in Malaysia”, *Pertanika Journal of Social Sciences & Humanities* 25, no. S (2017): 70–72.

<sup>23</sup> Norhafiza, “The Dynamics of Youth Political Participation”, 91, 246.

<sup>24</sup> Norhafiza, “The Dynamics of Youth Political Participation”, 263.

<sup>25</sup> Haris Zuan, “Youth in the Politics of Transition in Malaysia”, in *Toward a New Malaysia? The 2018 Election and Its Aftermath*, ed. Meredith L. Weiss and Faisal S. Hazis (Singapore: NUS Press, 2020).

<sup>26</sup> Haris, “Youth in the Politics of Transition in Malaysia”, 136.

<sup>27</sup> Haris, “Youth in the Politics of Transition in Malaysia”, 136.

crop of young candidates.<sup>28</sup> Youth activists themselves organised the Coalition of Youth for Malaysia (Gabungan Anak Muda Demi Malaysia), later reorganised as Liga Pemuda (Youth League). The coalition's 2017 Malaysian Youth Congress (Kongres Anak Muda Malaysia) produced a 13-point declaration; the league then endorsed and supported six members for state-level elections.<sup>29</sup> The avowedly non-partisan Malaysia Muda (Young Malaysia), formed in 2017, and Sabahan Borneo Komrad likewise mobilised for political change, implicitly critiquing the BN, while other youth-led initiatives, often online, focused on get-out-the-vote drives and efforts to help overseas voters return to cast votes.<sup>30</sup>

Whether or not the youth vote ultimately favours the status quo, civic education efforts stand to shift the issues that parties address and the nature of the electoral terrain. Even if they feel disempowered, Malaysian youth are, on the whole, fairly well informed, politically aware, and concerned about their country's direction and their own prospects. Indeed, it was youth themselves who led the Undi18 charge. Moreover, youth initiatives such as a Parliamen Digital, a virtual mock legislative session that local youth organisations held in July 2020 — an unsubtle jab at the real parliament's failure at the time to convene virtually — have not only been successful as events, but have also honed awareness and leadership. The hashtag #MasaKita (#OurTurn) proliferated in social media after the mock parliament: frustrated youths, impatient with the current ranks of leaders, proposed that a new generation give governance a go.<sup>31</sup> As organisers of the initiative pointed out, too, its emphasis was far more on “creating good policies for the country” than on partisan politicking.<sup>32</sup>

Several forms of politically consequential “civic” engagement, of varying scales in terms of reach and participation, are especially worth watching. Intriguing youth-led and/or youth-oriented civic-education and political-cultural initiatives suggest potentially important implications for political socialisation and culture — promoting everything from civic and political literacy to more robust multiculturalism and legislative strengthening. Some of these initiatives might be considered a logical extension of the *sekolah politik* (politics schools) that both parties and NGOs launched in the 2000s for civic education,<sup>33</sup> but with an increasingly targeted, and less overtly or implicitly partisan focus.

A number of these efforts have built upon longer-percolating initiatives among undergraduate students — and thus may incline towards better-educated, often middle-class and/or urban youth. Campus elections have long mimicked the alignments of national politics — even though students from the early 1970s until recently were barred from joining or supporting parties — but have also broached the gamut of socio-political concerns regarding campus life and the wider society.<sup>34</sup> While

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<sup>28</sup> Haris, “Youth in the Politics of Transition in Malaysia”, 140–42.

<sup>29</sup> Haris, “Youth in the Politics of Transition in Malaysia”, 142–43.

<sup>30</sup> Haris, “Youth in the Politics of Transition in Malaysia”, 143–44.

<sup>31</sup> Teoh, “Youth Moving to the Forefront of Malaysian Politics”.

<sup>32</sup> Tharmelinggem Pillai and Alicia Nicolle, “Reflections on ‘Parliamen Digital’”, *The Star*, 12 July 2020, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/focus/2020/07/12/reflections-on-parliamen-digital>.

<sup>33</sup> Haris, “Youth in the Politics of Transition in Malaysia”.

<sup>34</sup> Meredith L. Weiss, *Student Activism in Malaysia: Crucible, Mirror, Sideshow* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell SEAP, and Singapore: NUS Press, 2011).

some recent developments — not least 29-year-old MP Syed Saddiq Syed Abdul Rahman’s launch of a new party, Malaysia United Democratic Alliance, or MUDA (Youth), to empower younger politicians and amplify youth voices<sup>35</sup> — fit squarely in the ambit of electoral politics, others focus elsewhere. Even where these efforts echo the uptick in engagement discernible in Malaysia since the Reformasi movement of the late 1990s, the path from then to now may not be linear.

Today’s youth came of age in an era of expanded avenues for awareness-raising and mobilisation generally, and of prominent, lively mass movements around core political positions and identities, from free-and-fair elections to Islamism. Regardless of their personal ideological or policy preferences, Malaysian youth are thus acculturated to new ways of approaching and engaging in politics, making it more likely that they develop and model new habits of participation and enforcing accountability. It is to this sort of activism-beyond-elections, then, that we might turn to see how Malaysian youth are changing Malaysian politics — regardless of whether or how they vote.

## Critical history and civic education

As the Reformasi movement raised hopes for systemic change — and as Anwar Ibrahim, who got his start as a student leader three decades earlier, seized the moment — both contemporary youth and those from cohorts long past joined the chorus. That resurfacing encouraged an introspective, historical turn. Young activists came to learn of illustrious progenitors and their campaigns; long-exiled or dormant activists such as Hishamuddin Rais mentored young acolytes in “agitprop”, street theatre and the like;<sup>36</sup> and youths such as graphic designer Fahmi Reza developed multimedia or other projects on “student power” and similar themes in Malaysia’s past.<sup>37</sup> Even as Reformasi petered out in the 2000s, those efforts evolved, especially as the internet and social media also evolved.

Closely cognate to such historical- and civic-education projects are a host of issue-specific efforts, raising awareness and encouraging mobilisation around environmental conservation, sexuality rights, refugee and migrant communities, Covid-19 mitigation strategies, and more. Many of those campaigns involve and reach out to youths, but they are less commonly framed as by and for young people specifically: their focus is more on public policy and social reform appropriate to a liberal polity than on training up democratic citizens in a general sense. While we also find in Malaysia undergraduate campaigns that address concerns clearly bounded by the campus, from course fees to wi-fi access,<sup>38</sup> of especial note are broad-based, civic-education-oriented efforts that decentre the university, even when the initiative and/or its creators are based there.

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<sup>35</sup> Piya Raj Sukhani, “Is MUDA a New Hope for Malaysian Politics?” *East Asia Forum*, 28 November 2020, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2020/11/28/is-muda-a-new-hope-for-malaysian-politics/>.

<sup>36</sup> Weiss, *Student Activism in Malaysia*, 243.

<sup>37</sup> See, for instance, his presentation, “Student Power! Sejarah kebangkitan mahasiswa Universiti Malaya ’60an” at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S-abHWIs-p4>.

<sup>38</sup> Roslizawati Taib and Mohd Rizal Yaakop, “Pendemokrasian mahasiswa di Intitusi pengajian tinggi di Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia”, *Geografia Online: Malaysian Journal of Society and Space* 13, no. 4 (2017): 99, 102–03. A cluster of new projects are now afoot. Among them are Malaysian Youths for Education Reform — an “independent youth-led movement for education reform in Malaysia”, focused specifically on the government’s

Critical historiography might seem tangential at best to a project of democratic transformation. Yet, especially where suppression of critical discourses has been part of illiberal-regime maintenance,<sup>39</sup> these efforts are essential to reframing citizens' relationship to their polity. Moreover, the message that one has a right to participate need not dictate how, or with which partisan camp. That these initiatives are by and for youths is especially salient: blending revisionist (or simply unabridged) socio-political history with purposeful civic-education efforts, a cluster of projects urge young Malaysians to reach political awareness with a sense of agency, not of subordination. In that same early-2021 Merdeka Center survey referenced earlier, 70% of youth declared themselves uninterested in politics and 78% deemed it "beyond their grasp", even as a startling 88% agreed that Malaysians need to develop "new political thinking that is no longer premised on race and religious difference".<sup>40</sup>

Initiatives such as Imagined Malaysia and Pusat Sejarah Rakyat (People's History Centre) both explore and present little-known history. As Imagined Malaysia explains its mission, the project responds to a "lack of contestation in the perspective of historical events taking place at the current moment in the public sphere". Drawing on local intellectual history, it hopes to create "a platform that promotes the role of activist-historians in public education as well as a source of encouragement and inspiration for Malaysian youth to have a critical appreciation for history".<sup>41</sup> The more established, and less-exclusively youth-run Pusat Sejarah Rakyat pursues similar objectives via an oral history collection, online digital archives, and public forums and webinars. While the materials the centre collects lean left, the project sidesteps partisan politics; the goal is contextualisation and historical literacy, not engagement in formal politics.

While some of these initiatives also staged road-shows, artistic performances and other events pre-Covid, much of their work has pivoted online: public talks reformulated as webinars, documentary films and educational cartoons available for streaming, and other outreach activities. (Indeed, the ascendance of online platforms like Zoom and Facebook Live during the pandemic has arguably multiplied these groups' impact.) Joanne Lim suggests, in fact, that the popularity among youth of indie film-making and video-blogging in particular facilitates (potentially viral) influence for social-change advocates. These tools and platforms foster new connections and may represent a form of "participatory activism" that spurs political action;<sup>42</sup> they allow youths to raise, disseminate and discuss "taboo issues ... for the purpose of civic consciousness rather than mere cultural

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2013–25 Malaysian Education Blueprint and other education-, student-, and school-related issues (see <https://myermovement.medium.com/>) — and Haksiswa, a united front for student activism (<https://www.instagram.com/haksiswa/>, <https://www.facebook.com/Haksiswamalaysia/>), which likewise focuses on student autonomy, the history and future of student activism, and campus reform, along with implementation of Undi18.

<sup>39</sup> Weiss, *Student Activism in Malaysia*.

<sup>40</sup> Ayamany, "Is Malaysian Politics Heading in the Right Direction?"

<sup>41</sup> Imagined Malaysia, "About", <https://imaginedmalaysia.wordpress.com/about/>.

<sup>42</sup> Joanne B. Y. Lim, "Video Blogging and Youth Activism in Malaysia", *International Communication Gazette* 75, no. 3 (2013): 302–04.

consumption”.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, these modes of low-cost engagement help to dissociate educative functions from partisan or other action in response.

One quite vibrant civic-education initiative, Youth in Politics (YPolitics), sums up the essence of this category, defining itself as, “a multi-partisan and independent youth-led movement that aims to generate a more politically aware Malaysian youth”.<sup>44</sup> Using Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn since its launch in June 2020, YPolitics has focused on producing a series of punchy, informative and accessible issue backgrounders. Each presents key data and concepts, clear explanation, pithy critiques of current practices and the state of debate, and, where appropriate, personal action steps. All feature plain language (English and Malay), plus eye-catching graphics and a bibliography. Booklets bearing a #hotissue hashtag have covered, for instance, the government’s response to Covid-19, sexual harassment in schools, climate change, migrant workers, the Philippines’ claim to Sabah, the federal budget, vernacular schools, and the 1MDB corruption scandal. A cognate #tahutak hashtag (literally, know or not) marks booklets on such topics as public finance, national security, police misconduct, federalism, constitutional monarchy, and the workings of parliamentary government generally.

Another series bearing the #yearinMCO hashtag (referring to the Movement Control Order issued in response to the pandemic) addresses not only the MCO itself and issues of equitable enforcement, but also, for instance, the implications of suspending parliament, the vaccine roll-out, implications of the digital divide for pandemic-era education, mental health and domestic violence amid shutdowns, and the economic implications of the pandemic and related stimulus packages. A #knowyourrights series delves into such topics as freedom of expression and one’s rights when stopped by the police or arrested. A #mythbuster piece addresses whether youth are indeed too politically apathetic to warrant enfranchisement and better representation. Complementing these materials have been webinars, for instance on “Law and Politics” and on mobilising youth for political engagement. Some initiatives have been in collaboration with other NGOs — for instance, the #tahutak booklets on female genital mutilation, domestic violence, and stateless or otherwise undocumented children were produced with the Women’s Aid Organisation.

While some of YPolitics’ efforts have homed in narrowly on youth — such as an initial drive to survey their political awareness, or an October 2020 #BantuSiswa drive to raise funds to assist students in the pandemic — most take a broad view. The aim is political literacy and engagement in a general sense; YPolitics’ backgrounders are likely of equal utility for many adults as for young people. Some booklets do delve into partisan politics, such as one in September 2020 on Malaysia’s shifting party alignments and distribution of parliamentary seats — but, even then, the goal is plainly to explain, not

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<sup>43</sup> Lim, “Video Blogging and Youth Activism, 312.

<sup>44</sup> See its Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/ypolitics.my/>, or, for an especially straightforward layout, its Instagram page at <https://www.instagram.com/ypolitics.my/>; other social-media platforms echo this content.

to persuade. In the process, these efforts take advantage of existing public space to lay the ground for democratic deepening over time, especially as the youths targeted grow older and more confident.

## Ideological reform

Meanwhile, much as has been the case for PAS, Islamist organisations, including youth-led ones, have tipped towards “basics” in recent years. Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (ABIM), for instance — a longstanding giant in the field — reconsolidated under new leadership in 2005, determined to return to its Muslim Brotherhood roots and engage with both government and opposition. The group, explains Zulkifly Abdul Malek, “declared war against forces attempting to subvert the primary role of Islam in Malaysia’s polity through devious ideas such as liberal Islam, religious pluralism and unbridled human rights”.<sup>45</sup> Other youth *dakwah* groups took similar paths. However, ABIM is especially worth examining, given its heavyweight status, its track record of members’ entry into politics, and its shifts in trajectory.

ABIM’s ideology and positioning have vacillated since its establishment in the early 1970s.<sup>46</sup> But after the Reformasi years of the late 1990s and early 2000s, when it had joined other Islamist groups in collaborating (not without some hiccups) in a broad-based anti-BN movement, ABIM rearticulated its support for the *Islam hadhari* (civilisational Islam) that then UMNO PM Abdullah Badawi espoused. More broadly, ABIM’s new third-generation leadership adopted a pragmatic, non-confrontational, and more “spiritual” and socially conscious approach, aiming to renew its reputation, relevance and dominance.<sup>47</sup> Yet during this phase, too, ABIM came to anchor a network called Organizations for the Defence of Islam (Pertubuhan-pertubuhan Pembela Islam or PEMBELA, for short) that specifically opposed interfaith efforts, championed the authority and stature of *syariah* courts, and espoused a consistently hard line on apostasy cases — a stance that, in the context of a less communal “new politics”, “convey[ed] the impression of veering toward religious ethnocentrism” and a more legalistic than spiritual focus.<sup>48</sup>

Since that point, ABIM has again taken on ideological reform, but swimming *against* what would seem a propitious tide for political Islam. Even as the Malay-Muslim-centric PN has consolidated its control (and before that, as PAS and UMNO cemented an ethno-nationalist alliance), ABIM has instead championed “cosmopolitan” Islamism and multiculturalism, espousing a *Bangsa Malaysia*, or Malaysian (rather than Malay) nation — historically a trope associated with non-Malay Malaysians. Columnist Nathaniel Tan, writing on ABIM’s embrace of this discourse, muses that, “The fact that Abim, a grassroots movement steeped deeply in Malay and Muslim identity, should choose this path

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<sup>45</sup> Zulkifly Abdul Malek, “From Cairo to Kuala Lumpur: The Influence of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood on the Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia (ABIM)” (MA thesis, Georgetown University, 2011), 66–67.

<sup>46</sup> See Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid, “Islamist Realignments and the Rebranding of the Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia”, *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 30, no. 2 (2008).

<sup>47</sup> Ahmad Fauzi, “Islamist Realignments”, 219–27.

<sup>48</sup> Ahmad Fauzi, “Islamist Realignments”, 228–31.

is especially significant". The question of "what it means to be Malaysian", he continues, requires "a journey of discovering what our common values are, and what principles we want to strive towards as a united nation. ... When we know, clearly and deeply, what values and principles bind us as a nation, then we will finally have a way out of the mires and political impasses of today."<sup>49</sup>

This focus for ABIM is part of a larger emphasis it shares with a cluster of fellow youth organisations on civic education, but with the aim of communicating a particular vision for the country. ABIM has worked together with partners to organise discussion and training sessions on, for instance, strengthening civil society as a step towards political democracy, and it touts project-specific work with secular advocacy NGOs such as All Women's Action Society,<sup>50</sup> apart from perhaps more "typical" efforts such as advocacy for Palestine. For ABIM to tout an ideological line is hardly new, as its history suggests. What is notable is its inclusive intent — a turn ABIM president Muhammad Faisal Abdul Aziz describes as in line with changes in direction of the Muslim Brotherhood and other Brotherhood-linked organisations.<sup>51</sup> In Malaysia, such an effort deepens democratic tendencies, given its emphasis on "integration and national cohesion" as the keys to surmounting political tension. Officially non-partisan, ABIM presents this frame absent a plug for any particular party, and ABIM alumni appear across Malaysian political parties (even if founder Anwar Ibrahim, now head of the opposition PKR, surfaces in messaging, and ABIM has opposed PAS on policies). Rather, this current campaign focuses more on a political perspective as starting point than a desired electoral end point.

However matter-of-factly Muhammad Faisal declares that "[t]he right way to understand identity is to see it as an inclusive, unifying factor rather than something that divides and separates",<sup>52</sup> that approach sharply contradicts a zero-sum communal politics and offers youth inclined towards Islamist politics a different take on how that might play out in multiracial Malaysia. What makes this framing so useful as a grounding for democratic praxis is its cosmopolitan assumption of "shared values" — of "unity and openness", and, specifically, the contention that at its crux is "a united front against poverty, corruption and conflict as well as a shared resolve to protect and raise the dignity of all Malaysians".<sup>53</sup> And indeed, ABIM presents this agenda as preparing Malaysia effectively for inclusive governance and effective policymaking.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Nathaniel Tan, "Bangsa Malaysia: Worth Fighting For", *Sunday Star*, 27 December 2020, p. 18.

<sup>50</sup> "Role of CSOs in Empowering Political Democracy", 13 March 2020, ABIM Secretariat; "Cosmopolitan Islam & the Forging of Bangsa Malaysia: Half a Century of ABIM's Muslim Movement" (video clip, 20 March 2021), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=85WKhZNweec>.

<sup>51</sup> Interview, Muhammad Faisal Abdul Aziz, Kuala Lumpur, 13 March 2020.

<sup>52</sup> Muhammad Faisal Abdul Aziz, "Cosmopolitan Islam and the Forging of Bangsa Malaysia", *Star*, 8 January 2021, <https://www.thestar.com.my/opinion/letters/2021/01/08/cosmopolitan-islam-and-the-forging-of-bangsa-malaysia>.

<sup>53</sup> Muhammad Faisal, "Cosmopolitan Islam.

<sup>54</sup> ABIM, "Kesepakatan resolusi" slides, Resolusi sidang kemuncak bangsa Malaysia 2021 [27 March 2021].

## Institutional reform

Lastly, we turn to youth-directed efforts at institutional reform — at building capacity for democratic governance. Efforts that build on the disruption of the dominant-party status quo in 2018 (and on incremental steps towards that end through the preceding decade) have been particularly consequential and novel. A surge in institutional-reform initiatives — starting most obviously with calls for electoral reform that gained especial potency with the launch of Bersih, the Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections, in late 2006 — was part and parcel of PH's ascent to office, first at the state level as Pakatan Rakyat, and then as the coalition that ousted the BN in 2018. Youth picked up on, and joined, that zeitgeist. That their efforts are *not* pinned too closely to electoral politics, apart from that initial structural opening, comes through in the fact that they have continued beyond PN's takeover.

Representative of this category is the Institute for Political Reform and Democracy, or Reform, for short. This youth-led organisation owes its sustenance in part to the fact of Malaysia's tried-but-failed regime transition: the bilateral, multilateral and institutional donors — UNDP, Open Society Foundation, USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives, etc. — who swarmed in with resources in hand and funded civil society organisations as launching pads for the systemic reforms that PH promised. Some of these now might continue, anchored in civil society rather than in formal politics.

Reform was launched formally as a non-partisan advocacy group in April 2019, under the PH administration, its organisers seeing a niche for political education via training, publications, seminars and the like. Their focal areas are constitutional literacy, education about democracy, parliamentary research, and advocacy, targeting both politicians and the general public (especially youth, women and rural communities). While civic education remains a central thrust — for instance, a summer school to introduce secondary-school students to the workings of government<sup>55</sup> — particularly germane here is their work in parliamentary strengthening at the federal and state levels. Issues range from the functioning of select committees, and politicians' working with media, to revising the Parliamentary Services Act and training aspiring parliamentary researchers.<sup>56</sup>

Importantly, given Malaysian dynamics, the Malay-led Reform operates primarily (80–90%) in the Malay language, whereas most similarly oriented civil society groups, apart from Islamist ones, skew non-Malay in membership and resort substantially to English. That emphasis was not intentional — in fact, Reform's three (Malay) co-founders have sought to incorporate non-Malay colleagues — and yet they also realise that the Malay language is the best medium to engage with the Malay-Muslim majority. Reform's internships, online forums and other programming can be expected to reach young

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<sup>55</sup> The Junior State of America program serves as model.

<sup>56</sup> Institute for Political Reform and Democracy, "Tentang Reform", <https://www.reformalaysia.com/>; interview, Idzuafi Hadi Kamilan, Executive Director of Reform, 27 May 2021, via Zoom.

Malays especially effectively, not least a set of programmes organised in conjunction with either the International Islamic University Malaysia or ABIM, or addressing issues of Islam and democracy.<sup>57</sup>

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. If ABIM's focus is on normative shift, Reform's homes in on pragmatic capacity-building to enable democratisation: training parliamentary staff, delving into the legislature's role in the budget process, and so forth. (These efforts are complementary, though they are sometimes conjoint, especially given overlapping leadership between Reform and ABIM.) More even than for ABIM or YPolitics, too, Reform works explicitly across party lines, meeting with and otherwise featuring politicians from both government and opposition. It helps with their reception, explains co-founder Idzuafi Hadi Kamilan, that politicians from all sides know him from his work previously as a parliamentary officer.<sup>58</sup> Even so, Reform's critique of PM Muhyiddin's emergency declaration and suspension of parliament — part of their parliamentary advocacy work — is inherently open to a partisan reading, however focused on issues of constitutionality and precedents.

## Taking Stock

What then can we make of all this? The patterns suggest that in the short term we might see only the usual partisan ebbs and flows, but a longer-term view may reveal effects of deeper-set shifts in political socialisation. I suggest two key areas of interest: how we should understand democratisation or liberalisation, and how we should approach youth politics and activism.

While elections offer an easy entry point into evaluating relative “democracy”, they are not an end point in that assessment. As Malaysia's recent experience makes clear, an electoral win may prove fleeting — and could well reflect more the contingency of current events or a given leader's missteps than any real change in popular preferences or norms. Malaysia's brief stint under PH did open the door to reform initiatives: the fact of a change of government normalised discussion of institutional reform, beckoned international donors, and vindicated, for a time, pro-democracy activists. That efforts at reform preceded and have continued beyond that interregnum reaffirms, though, that liberalisation entails more than, and may not even require, a change of government; the work of real regime change runs far deeper.<sup>59</sup>

The bigger picture, though, is a global impression of increasing “political dissent authored by young people” and a role for youth in “regenerating new kinds of politics” in light of hard experience with neoliberal policies in particular. But it is also one of youth disengagement from electoral politics —

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<sup>57</sup> Interview, Idzuafi Hadi Kamilan; “Misi & Objektif” (post on Reform's Facebook page), <https://www.facebook.com/REFORM.Malaysia/photos/pcb.514443506029340/514443472696010>.

<sup>58</sup> Interview, Idzuafi Hadi Kamilan.

<sup>59</sup> Meredith L. Weiss, “Of Inequality and Irritation: New Agendas and Activism in Malaysia and Singapore”, *Democratization* 21, no. 5 (2014).

coupled with increasing state resistance to that participation.<sup>60</sup> Malaysian experience suggests how complex reality may be. That many youth are susceptible to the same pragmatic lures of governments, for the same practical reasons as are their elders, should temper our expectation that youth present their own, sui generis political logic. Nor is it realistic or reasonable to assume youth lean “leftwards” in their predilections; even those opposed to the government of the day critique, like their older counterparts, from different ideological vantage points. But most important in this vein is our understanding of what youth political participation constitutes — too many conventional accounts miss much that is of real import.

This finding is not to understate or undervalue young people’s contributions to Malaysian electoral politics: to strengthening political parties, to get-out-the-vote efforts, and to a host of creative and high-impact 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 information about policy issues, and appreciation for principles of fairness. It is at these deeper levels that the sorts of initiatives profiled here work, sowing seeds rather than reaping harvests of democratisation. Youth alone cannot rescue or revive a faltering Malaysian democracy — indeed, no one age group or community could. But they are playing key roles towards that end, such that Malaysia emerges over time better positioned for democratised governance, as rising cohorts expect more than the illiberal status quo.

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<sup>60</sup> Judith Bessant and Maria T. Grasso, “Governing Youth Politics in the Age of Surveillance”, in *Governing Youth Politics in the Age of Surveillance*, ed. Maria T. Grasso and Judith Bessant (New York: Routledge, 2018), 3, 7.

## About the Author



**Meredith Weiss** is Professor of Political Science and director of Rockefeller College's Semester in Washington Program. She has published widely on social mobilization and civil society, the politics of identity and development, electoral politics and parties, institutional reform, and subnational governance in Southeast Asia, with particular focus on Malaysia and Singapore. Her books include *Student Activism in Malaysia: Crucible, Mirror, Sideshow* (Cornell SEAP, 2011); *Protest and Possibilities: Civil Society and Coalitions for Political Change in Malaysia* (Stanford, 2006); *The Roots of Resilience: Party Machines and Grassroots Politics in Southeast Asia* (Cornell, 2020); and the co-authored *Mobilizing for Elections: Patronage and Political Machines in Southeast Asia* (Cambridge, forthcoming). She has also edited or co-edited eleven volumes, most recently, *The Political Logics of Anticorruption Efforts in Asia* (SUNY, 2019), and *Toward a New Malaysia? The 2018 Election and Its Aftermath* (NUS, 2020). Her articles appear in *Asian Studies Review*, *Asian Survey*, *Critical Asian Studies*, *Democratization*, *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, *Journal of Democracy*, *Journal of Human Rights*, *Taiwan Journal of Democracy*, and other journals. Current projects include collaborative studies of urban governance and public-goods delivery, of civil society in Southeast Asia, and of pandemic governance; and a monograph on Malaysian sociopolitical development.

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