

[ADRN Issue Briefing]

An Emergence of Youth Participation in Malaysian Politics

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Malaysian youth are more politically aware nowadays compared to the previous years. They have become more interested in current affairs and how they can participate as much as possible.

Under the Pakatan Harapan Government in 2019, the Malaysian parliament approved a bill to reduce the voting age for general elections from 21 to 18 years old and also approved the Automatic Voter Registration (AVR) that was set to be implemented this year. It was an opportunity for young people, mostly first-time voters, to vote in the 2023 15th General Election.

However, in March 2021, the Election Commission (EC) announced that the changes would not be implemented this year due to the pandemic and the Movement Control Order (MCO). Younger people might see this as an obstruction to their freedom of expression and freedom to choose a better government.

The rise of social movements, such as Undi18, that pushed for the bill to be approved is a case that displays how eager young people are to take part in the decision-making process. More platforms and opportunities should be given to the young people to voice out and contribute to Malaysia's democracy.

Setting an Important Role in the Political Scene

The political scene in Malaysia has become so fragmented that no one political party is dominant enough to rule. This presents an opportunity for a new and fresh youth-led political movement to start leading platforms that will attract young people and give them space to express themselves.

Malaysian United Democratic Alliance or MUDA, led by former Youth and Sports Minister and Member of Parliament (MP) for Muar, YB Syed Saddiq, has caught the attention of not only the public but also the seniors in the political field. The number of young people in Malaysia is growing with at least 45% of the population, or 14.6 million people, between the ages of 15 to 39 years old. Therefore, MUDA has created a new platform option where young people can share their vision and ideas for the future of Malaysia. It has become easier for youth to be involved in the decision-making process and the voice of the youth is being taken into consideration more.

There are limitless potentials for the first-ever youth-centric political party that aims to focus on the youth agenda. However, the party needs to find the right tune in terms of the true

objectives of this kind of party. It is crucial that their mission and vision are clear in order to survive the already existing political environment.

A youth party such as MUDA needs to have a unique feature to outshine existing political parties and put themselves ahead of others. A party that is led by the young people itself is unique in the sense that the public expects that they will be open to changes and move far from the existing political culture and norms such as corruption, fund mismanagement, and political patronage.

Youth in the Decision-Making Process

Young politicians are not new in many countries around the world. To name a few, New Zealand's Jacinda Ardern, Finland's Sanna Marin, and Ukraine's Oleksiy Honcharuk have become the leader of their respective country. In Malaysia, one of the few names that immediately come to mind is YB Syed Saddiq and YB P. Prabaharan as the Member of Parliament (MP) for Batu. They entered the political field in their early 20s and have made a lot of progress along the way.

A new set of fresh ideas and energy would undoubtedly give an advantage to the whole process of democracy in Malaysia. It is said that the current generation of leaders combined with veteran politicians lacks the will to push for government reforms and are only trying to stay in power to serve their self-interest. Young politicians such as Syed Saddiq and P. Prabaharan could step in and push politicians to better face the challenges of the 21st century, such as a fast-changing job market, technological advancements, and accelerating climate change.

In addition to being the driving force for reforms, newcomers or young politicians should also be ready to face criticism and mixed reactions, especially from the grassroots level consisting of different constituencies. It is not easy for people, especially youth from diverse backgrounds, to accept the same or singular idea that these newcomers are trying to project. They have to be as relevant as possible to all different walks of life.

Additionally, some Malaysians view the current generation of leaders to be stuck in the old political mindset that revolves only around race, religion, and states. The lack of options in the current political leadership has caused people to turn to alternative youth politicians such as YB Khairy Jamaluddin (UMNO), YB Nurul Izzah (PKR), YB Shahar Abdullah (UMNO), YB Hannah Yeoh (DAP), and many others to bring up issues that are more relevant to them such as unemployment, access to education, and healthcare.

The Role of Social Media

Social media provides a platform for young people to engage with different political personalities and offers a 'space' for them to receive political information while expressing their voice on different issues. The youth's growing interest in political participation has made them a target for politicians and political parties due to their strength, expectations, and mental tendency to welcome and support new ideas.

Syed Saddiq, the founder of MUDA has been pushing for more social media engagement on platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok. His active role on these platforms has made him closer to his audience (the youth), who can relate to the issues projected by Syed Saddiq. Issues such as unemployment among young graduates, youth participation in parliamentary debates, and

voting age are easily relatable to many young people. Social media has provided a unique opportunity for young people to participate in the discussion virtually.

Challenges for the Youth Political Party

One of MUDA's earlier significant challenges was getting approval to be officially registered as a political party under the Malaysian Registrar of Societies (RoS). The Societies Act of 1966 is an Act that was enacted to govern matters relating to the registration of societies, which in Malaysia's case, includes political parties. As flaws might exist in the Act itself, the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (SUHAKAM) has offered several recommendations for the reformation of the Act.

The following are just some of the recommendations made by the SUHAKAM: (1) there should be a proportionate exercise of power by the RoS for the purpose of the said Act, (2) "the absolute discretion of the Minister to declare a society unlawful" provision should be reviewed, (3) the provision of a specific timeframe for the RoS' decision on a registration application and communication to the applicant on the decision should be made, and (4) the RoS should be obliged to publicly state reasons for declining or not responding to an application for registration of associations.

In the case of MUDA, the approval process took more than one year since they submitted the application to RoS and were rejected without specific reasons. MUDA has since sought a court order to compel the Ministry of Home Affairs (the supervising ministry of RoS) to decide on the appeal of the registration application under Section 18 of the Societies Act 1966.

Additionally, the lack of resources is another challenge MUDA faces. How a political party with no prior experience or roots can survive is a crucial question that should be asked. A new party that does not have a solid support base will not be able to navigate itself in the tight competition between areas that are Malay-Bumiputra majority or areas with a specific race as the majority, in which most of them are conservatives. The public might portray Syed Saddiq as too young, too naive, and wanting to merely rock the boat, thus diverging from the usual norms that the public has been used to for so long.

For the party to have a bright future, setting a credible leadership line-up is crucial to put forward brilliant ideas and strategies that will allow the party to win the support of young voters and make sure that the party's existence is continuously relevant in the political scene. ■

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