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DOES DEMOCRACY HAVE A FUTURE?

Elections, Youth and Leadership

Understanding and Rethinking Youth Policy in Malaysia

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"No one is born a citizen; no nation is born a democracy. Rather, both are processes that continue to evolve over a life time. Youth must be included from birth. A society that cuts itself away from its youth severs its lifelong; it is condemned to bleed to death" Kofi Annan UN Secretary General (United Nations, 2004: p.271).

Abstract

This study aims at policy study proposal which will provide a greater understanding of the changing nature of Youth in Malaysia and an important part of providing a youth perspective on the government's broader agenda that equip young Malaysian to fully participate in all aspect of their life. Investing in young people is essential to prepare Malaysian and its people for the challenges of the future. Providing young Malaysian with the support they need to succeed is part of governing in the long-term national interest. Therefore, the Malaysian government should be determined to elevate the quality and rigour of policy making for young people and to do so hand in hand with young people. Any youth policy making must ensure that young people's needs and perspectives are taken into account in all government business and that have an eye for the consequences of tomorrow as well as today. Growing up is a challenge and the transition to adulthood can be a difficult one for some young people. At the same time the policy should recognises that today's generation of young Malaysians face new and unique challenges—challenges like different social and family patterns, rapidly changing technology, an evolving labour market and climate change.

Keywords: Youth Policy, Rethinking, Participation

Introduction

The 2011 Arab Spring was a clear signal to governments and ruling parties around the world that the time had come for reform & rethinking their youth policy. The young Arabs in the Middle East and North Africa were demanding nothing less than sweeping political, social and economic change. The Arab spring, clearly demonstrate that youth are an increasingly potent force, capable of instigating major social, economic, and political change.

Although generally perceived by Malaysians to be ignorant on political issues, young people 21 to 35 year-olds account for nearly 45% of all eligible voters in Malaysia and could soon become the primary force in determining the issues and discourse of public policy and debate in the country.

However, it is important to note that young people generally grow up in incredibly varied circumstances, with different priorities and perspectives. While youth does not exist as a single group, there is an urgent task in understanding what is happening in young people's lives generally. It is obvious that restructuring economy has not been sufficient to insure jobs for many young people. How young men and young women negotiate their future varies, depending on cultural and national context. Young Malaysians are growing up in a world in which the use of new media technologies has brought the consumer markets to them. Although not all young Malaysian have the same access to consumption, the marketing youth through products is widespread, creating a superficial sameness based on age.

Furthermore, young people also subject to varies forms of education and training on an increasing scale for longer periods of their lives. It is very important to acknowledge that their involvement in education and training in increasing numbers is not necessarily related to a greater appreciation on their part of education in itself nor is it generally related to educational reforms which favour young people. Young people are often forced to seek refuge in education because they cannot find work. Therefore, it is important and timely to offer a new theoretical perspective on Malaysian youth which takes these complexities into account. Particularly it is very important to look at the extent to which young people are seen as citizens in their own right rather than as incomplete adults whose rights can be ignored.

The concept of youth

What does being "young" mean? Many would debate that being young need not necessarily be associated with age. The United Nations defines youth as persons between the ages of 15 and 25 years. The National Youth Development Policy of Malaysia defines youth as peopleaged between 15 and 40.

Youth have been the subjects of a massive amount of research over the last few decades. In general, most of the researchers assume that young people constitute a distinct category of people: as non-adults. A central and recurring theme in the studies is the problematic nature of being a young person and the even more problematic nature of becoming adult. Much of the literature about youth has inherited assumptions from developmental psychology about universal stages of development,

identity formation, normative behaviour and the relationship between social and physical maturation. Yet very little work has been done to clarify the theoretical basis of this categorisation based on age (Wyn & White 1997). S. Allen in her seminal article in 1968 argued that the concept of youth needed to be reassessed. She pointed out that, 'it is not the relations between ages that create change or stability in society, but change in society which explains relations between different ages' (Allen 1968).

Other scholar however, pointing out that the sociology of youth was yet to develop a conceptual framework for understanding both the transitions young people pass through as they become adult and the different experiences of young people from different social groups. Gill Jones for example, argued that it is 'misleading to emphasise the qualities or otherwise of "Youth" per se, since the young are neither a homogeneous group nor a static one' (G Jones 1988). Her conclusion was that youth is most usefully conceptualised as an age-related process. This means that the focus on youth is not on the inherent characteristics of youngpeople themselves, but on the construction of youth through social processes (such as schooling, families or the labour market). Young people engage with these institutions in specific ways, in relation to historical circumstances.

Therefore, the way they develop or grow will influence the type of adults they will become. Youth is an important life stage in human development. It covers a wide range, with young people entering as children and moving through adolescence on their way to becoming independent adults. It is significant period of development physically, psychologically and socially). It is also a period of enormous change in how young people relate to themselves and the environment around them. At this time, most young people question their identity, values and interest.

Malaysian youth development and challenges

Youth development is defined by scholars as a process that prepares a young person to meet the challenges of adolescence and adulthood, and achieve his or her full potential. It is promoted through activities and experiences that help youth develop social, ethical, emotional, physical, and cognitive competencies.

According to Global Youth Index & Report 2016, Malaysian youth constitute 46.5 per cent ofthe total population. This quantum of population is a great asset for Malaysia if they are harnessed and utilised in the right direction. Interestingly, the transition of society from one generation to another is critical to the formative and developmental aspiration of such society. That is why a society that prepares its youth for the sake of future aspirations will not only secure her future development, but will also prepares her next set of leaders with the challenges of national reconciliation and development.

Malaysia is facing a less well-known, but perhaps even more difficult predicament: demographics. The existence of a relatively large youth cohort with the population serves to exacerbate nearly all dimensions of its political, social and economic problems.

The challenges for youths that are central to Malaysia's economic development are numerous and varied — they include unemployment, under-employment, social, health and many otherissues. These issues differ among groups within the states in the country (by gender, educational level, ethnicity, religion, rural-urban).

One consequence of the social process we have described in this paper is that often young people do not have the power to shape their lives as they might otherwise have done. Focusing on the process of marginalisation offers a way of grasping the systematic nature of the exclusion of some groups of young people from full participation in society and its institutions.

The speed of technological advancement is a significant challenge Malaysian youths are facing. Today young Malaysian has never known a world without constant access to mobile smart phones, internet, email and social media. Young people are leading the way with new technology, the way it transforms our access to information and knowledge, and our ability to communicate and connect

with each other.

Although the present cohort of youth has numerous advantages, it also faces a complex and rapidly evolving situation where new opportunities coexist with major challenges. Fierce competition is affecting the marketplace, and its rules and practices in the country. Youths often remain in a vulnerable situation and lack the requisite knowledge and skills to adapt to the changing economic and social environment.

Many who are otherwise productive and energetic remain unemployed and continue to lack sufficient support. Some of them have special needs that require attention. These include

those living on the streets, those living with HIV/AIDS, those with disabilities and those who are facing social issues.

Unfortunately, the many youth policies and programmes to address these challenges do not seem to have resulted in a great deal of success. Weakness is due to a number of factors, including the inadequacy of information about youths that is necessary in the design ofpolicy, weak coordination among a host of government agencies and donors, and the failure to draw policies on a number of contemporary youth themes, such as youth and economy, youth development, youth subcultures, youth transition and youth marginalisation.

Any policy should start with the understanding of the changing nature of youth and exploring the issues from the perspective of new life patterns that see the current generation making adult choices in a highly individualised context. There is a need to create a new perspective which emphasises diversity and difference, democracy and equality in dealing with youth experience. At the same time it should provide the structure and foundations to address the priority issues of concern that have been raised by youth.

Malaysian youth have significant potential to be engaged in active roles to develop themselves, their communities and their nation.

This approach can work for young people in three ways. One is for the benefit of youth (as target beneficiaries); second is with youth as partners, and third is for programmes and policy to be shaped by youth as leaders. This is a dynamic approach which depends on the local context

and development intervention.

On that account, a national youth policy should demonstrate the country's commitment to, and strategic directions for, promoting and progressing the well-being and participation of young people and create opportunities for the young to become "skilled, healthy and productive to develop the country and specific strategies to translate the policy into action.

Policy recommendation

Investing in young people is essential to prepare Malaysia and its people for the challenges of the future. Providing young Malaysian with the support they need to succeed is part of governing in the long-term national interest. The government must be determined to elevate the quality and rigour of young people and must to do so hand in hand with young people. Any youth policy making the government has to ensure that young people's needs and perspectives are taken into account in all government business and that have to be an eye for the consequences of tomorrow as well as today.

*Recommendations to Ministry of the Ministry of Youth and Sports:*The Ministry of Youth is a state organ whose work is purely must be non-partisan. The Ministry has the mandate to genuinely campaign for the meaningful inclusion of the youth in governance and affect positive development. For meaningful participation, the ministry should not be politicized and represent the youth by acting upon their initiatives. There should be decentralization where provinces can make decisions without prior need to follow all the bureaucratic channels. Capacity building initiatives, business trainings, leadership workshops and seminars from local to national level should be carried out to sensitize the youth about their rights and opportunities. Transparency is one of the key issues that is needed in order to ensure both quantitative and qualitative positive participation of the youth. At the same time youth must actively participate in creating desired futures. This means not merely providing content on the knowledge base of the future but ensuring that they participate in envisioning the futures they desire.

Recommendations to Political parties: political parties have become a source of division in the country and the solidarity that used to exist amongst the youth has been eroded due to party politics. Beyond party politics there is a state in which national interests transcends personal

interests. Many researchers have observed that governance, democratization and political leadership are propelled by political parties. Thus there is need to rethink youth leadership and re-align the constitutions of these parties to ensure tolerance, free interaction with the youth of other political parties and extend a some peacebuilding campaigns within their party structures.

Recommendations to Civil society organizations: civil society organizations should foster some advocacy initiatives centred and captured at grassroots level. Promote grassroots associations and youth led organizations. Citizenship and rights based organizations should work to sensitize the youth on their role in governance and democratization without prior hostility with the state. Civil society organizations and students union should also decentralize their operations and increase ownership of their processes by the youth. Promote youth leadership even in their leadership.

Policy must be proactive, not merely responding to the latest crisis (youth suicide), but scanning for change and developing policy that can deal with youth's changing needs (Gidley & Sohail 2002)

Policy must be systemic and holistic because focusing only on the visible level of the problem ignores the deeper systemic issues (how technology leads to joblessness, for example) and worldview issues (the breakdown of meaning and community in modern and postmodern society). The policy must also address the deepest metaphorical level of personal narrative—the story youth tell themselves and others.

Policymakers also need to recognize that there is a cultural sea change (paradigm shift) occurring, namely, popular disenchantment with the dominant materialist worldview that grounds Western culture. Youth are part of this desire to see ethical and spiritual values become central to policy and action in all spheres of life.

Finally, youth desire futures based on truths. Can we create a world incorporates integrity and authenticity? If not, of what use are the futures we are creating?

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