ORANG KITA

Malay Youth Democratic Renewal Post-GE 15: The Politics of Acknowledgement and Resentment



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The genesis of **"Orang Kita: Politics of Acknowledgement and Resentment"** began as an inquiry into understanding why Malay youths overwhelmingly supported the Perikatan Nasional coalition during the Malaysian 15th General Elections (GE15) in 2022. It wasn't enough to investigate their political decision-making, but it was also essential to understand the broader context, informing how they understood politics, democracy, identity, and their larger place within Malaysia. This study engaged with Malay youths aged 18 to 35 across Peninsular Malaysia, particularly the **'Malay Heartlands'**, through in-depth interviews involving 105 participants from various backgrounds. This study provides detailed insights into several issues:



1. Economic Disillusionment and Class Resentment
   - Youths are deeply anxious about stagnant wages, rising costs of living, and a lack of viable job opportunities, particularly outside urban centres.
   - Mismatch between government economic optimism and lived realities fuels resentment, reinforcing a narrative that national growth benefits the urban, elite class rather than ordinary Malaysians.



2. Crisis of Political Legitimacy
   - There is widespread political apathy, stemming from perceived endless power struggles, broken reform promises, and weak policy delivery.
   - Trust in government is eroded by bureaucratic inefficiency, selective governance, and a failure to communicate effectively with the public.



3. Islam as Identity and Political Imperative
   - Islam is a religious framework and a political identity for Malay youths.
   - Concerns over liberalism, secularism, and perceived threats to Islamic institutions are widespread.
   - Islamisation is seen both as a corrective to democratic weaknesses and as a counterforce to non-Malay political influence.



4. Fragmented Democracy and Representation Deficit
   - While democracy is generally valued, many view Malaysia's democratic landscape as fractured and easily manipulated.
   - The multiplicity of Malay-Muslim parties is seen as diluting Malay political power.
   - Youths feel excluded from decision-making processes, used only as vote banks, and systematically denied leadership platforms.



5. Polarised Multiculturalism and Education as a Divider
    - While multiculturalism is a broadly held aspiration, inter-ethnic mistrust remains high.
    - Segregated schooling systems are blamed for entrenching ethnic silos and limiting cross-cultural understanding.
    - Education reform is urgently demanded to realign with economic realities and foster national cohesion.



6. Digital Youth, Silenced Voices
    - Social media is a critical space for youth political literacy, yet perceived censorship (e.g., under the guise of 3R restrictions) alienates them further.
    - There is a significant lack of community spaces or restrictions by government, particularly in semi-urban and rural areas, where youth can express, organise and form communities.



7. Selected Recommendations
    - **Strengthen meaningful youth engagement** through inclusive communication strategies, targeted outreach, and direct involvement in policymaking, especially outside the urbanised West Coast regions.
    - **Reform the education system** to align with current economic demands, improve political literacy, and foster inter-ethnic understanding from an early age.
    - **Support youth political participation** by creating structured pathways for leadership, mentorship opportunities, and institutional support within political parties and civil society platforms.
    - **Protect and expand spaces for expression**, both online and offline, by ensuring access to cultural, community and political avenues free from excessive censorship or politicisation.
    - **Promote an inclusive economic policy** that bridges the gap between national development narratives and the youth's lived realities, especially regarding job creation, wage growth, and social mobility.
    - **De-escalate identity-based polarisation** by promoting narratives and policies emphasising shared national belonging, while respecting religious and cultural diversity.

BACKGROUND

IMAN Research began its study on Malay youths aged 18 to 35 in July 2023, a few months after Malaysia finished its 2022 General Elections, which saw Anwar Ibrahim finally becoming the country's Prime Minister. In the months leading up to our study, the country grappled with the very idea and reality that PAS, the Islamist Party of Malaysia, and conservative Muslim parties and organisations had already come to roost in urban areas. That a coalition of political parties representing most races and religions in the country-Pakatan Harapan-did little to comfort non-Malays and liberal Malays, who could not believe that conservative Malay Muslims had a strong political hold in the country and the Federal constituency.

What contributed to the shift in voting behaviour can be linked to UNDI18. "The 2019 UNDI18 constitutional amendment lowered the voting age to 18 and introduced automatic voter registration. This increased the size of the electorate by a remarkable 40% between the 2018 and 2022 general elections. More recently, Anwar Ibrahim's unity government has pledged to increase the parliamentary seat share of East Malaysia's Sabah and Sarawak from 25% to 35%, despite the states already being significantly over-represented. Both these developments worsen the malapportionment in the country, potentially causing further political distortions," as observed by Kai Ostwald.[1]

In our study, what began as a presumption that young Malay voters leaned towards PAS and Islamist politics was revealed to be protest votes in the end, which we will elaborate on much later in our reports. To reach that conclusion, IMAN Research conducted a year-long study in Peninsular Malaysia, speaking with over 100 respondents of both genders in Terengganu, Kelantan, Perak, Penang, Perlis, and Kedah, as well as the Klang Valley. Our respondents came from various backgrounds: Skinheads, young graduates, Islamists, professionals, the unemployed, and small business owners, all of whom saw themselves as rightful stakeholders in the country's well-being, with many feeling that politics marginalised them.

Our team of researchers asked the young Malays we met about their ideas of democracy, multiculturalism and the country's future. The study aimed to empower them as future stakeholders and leaders of the country, encouraging them to understand democracy, the region's growing populism, and potential solutions.

[1] Ostwald, K. (2024). The Power of a Vote in Malaysia: Malapportionment Under UNDI18, AVR, and MA63. ISEAS Perspective, 2023(No. 30), pp.1–13.

This study has shown us that Malay youths are very informed, as the reader may have observed in our news articles and opinion essays, and desire agency to shape the future that involves them. Yes, there is brewing anger towards leadership that has failed them and their parents for generations, as well as political instability and the rising cost of living. While they all want multiculturalism, the desire for Islam to be all-encompassing is a primary goal. However, which Islam? After all, their voting for Perikatan Nasional in the last elections was a protest vote. Truly, this year-long project has revealed that what we perceive is not the truth.



Youth Experimental Poetry Event

METHODOLOGY

This study's primary data collection methods were semi-structured interviews. In-depth interviews are an effective way to collect detailed participant responses towards a particular topic. It is a qualitative methodology designed to explore perceptions, opinions and understanding of a specific topic.

Semi-structured interviews

This study took the approach of a semi-structured interview, where the researcher used a set of prepared questions but allowed the discussion to evolve in organic directions, where it appeared insightful to probe into specific emerging topics. A semi-structured interview helps create a space for participants to reflect upon their experiences, providing the researcher with an in-depth, rich understanding of a particular topic. The semi-structured interview goes through three stages. The first is rapport building, where the researcher familiarises the participant with the study-this helps ease the participant into the session. The second phase introduces initial questions while rapport is being developed. The third phase involves posing more challenging questions to encourage participants to reflect more deeply on a topic, with the discussion taking a more unrestricted form.

The study targeted Malaysian Malay youths aged 18 to 35, regardless of gender, socioeconomic class, employment status, or marital status. Participants resided in seven major states around the Malaysian Peninsula: Klang Valley, Negeri Sembilan, Pulau Pinang, Kedah, Perlis, Terengganu, and Kelantan. The interviews were conducted in several selected states, including Terengganu, Kedah, Perlis and Penang. These locations were chosen intentionally to reflect diversity in socio-demographic backgrounds and local political contexts. The participants were identified through local youth organisations, religious-based networks, student associations, and university unions.

The participants' participation terms were that each session would be audio-recorded, that they would remain anonymous as their data would not be published, and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. The sessions were established as a safe space where participants were encouraged to be candid and share their opinions freely without fear of judgment. Each session was conducted in a mixture of Bahasa Malaysia and English.

Participants were asked to answer 10 specific questions (their answers were recorded for transcribing purposes):

1. What are the most pressing issues facing Malaysians at present?
2. How would you describe the current state of democracy? Are there any changes you would like to see in the country's system or political process?
3. What are your thoughts on multiculturalism in Malaysia? How do you see the relationship between the different ethnic and religious groups in the country?
4. What is the role of Islam in Malaysian society and politics?
5. Are you involved in any organisations or political movements? If yes, can you share your involvement and why did you choose to participate?
6. What are your opinions on the role of youths in Malaysian politics? How do you see your role, and why do you choose to take part?
7. What do you think about the use of social media in politics? How does it influence your political opinions or participation, if any?
8. What are your thoughts on Malaysia's current state of the economy? In your opinion, how does it affect the political climate?
9. In what way do you feel represented (or underrepresented) in the current political landscape?
10. What is your vision for Malaysia? What are the steps necessary to achieve this vision?

There is also a set of additional questions which were prepared if the facilitator/researcher believed that it was relevant to explore:

1. How would you describe your political values? Does it change over time, and if so, why?
2. What are your thoughts on the right-wing movement in Malaysia and globally? Do you believe it affects Malaysia's political landscape?
3. What are your thoughts on the presence of refugees and (foreign) migrants in Malaysia?
4. What are your opinions on liberal democracy? What aspects of it do you find interesting or concerning?

Group Interviews

Within the framework of semi-structured, in-depth interviews, this study also employed group interviews to understand the perceptions of Malay youth towards politics in Malaysia. Each group interview session involved two to five participants, depending on the participants' availability and the suitability of the arrangement. The selection of participants for group interviews was purposive, focusing on Malay youth aged 18 to 35, with different educational backgrounds, employment experiences, political views, and levels of democratic participation.

The group interviews were carried out in a semi-structured format. The researchers employed a flexible set of basic questions in these sessions to ensure the discussion focused on the study's central themes. This approach enabled the researchers to capture the diverse dimensions of thinking, values, and spontaneous reactions of the participants towards current political issues in Malaysia. The interview sessions were recorded with participants' consent, and then transcribed to identify key themes. The themes identified in the analysis are discussed in the findings.

Demographics and Analysis

Data collection was conducted between August 2023 and March 2024, spanning the period from the Malaysian state elections to the onset of the Islamic month of Ramadan in 2024. IMAN successfully conducted in-depth interviews with 105 participants, with each session running between 60 and 120 minutes, depending on the interactions between participants or the richness of the discussion.

Participants were sampled through purposive snowball sampling, where the key criterion was to ensure that participants primarily resided within the selected states. The breakdown of the participants is as follows:

Gender



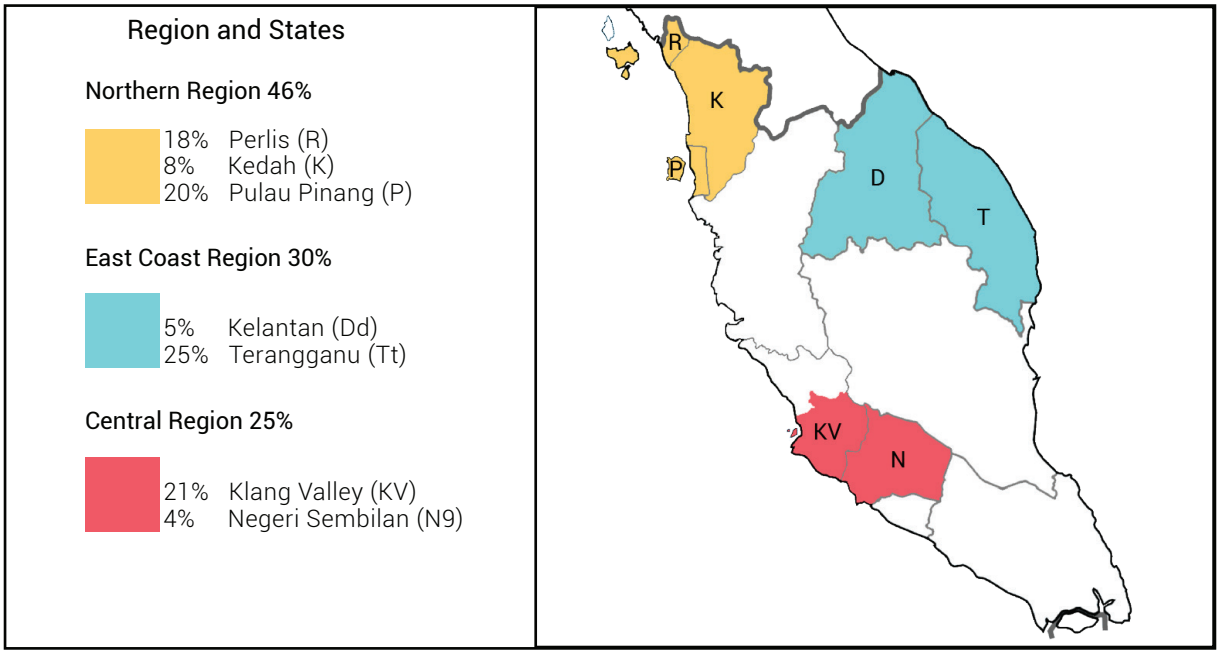
Age Group



10% 18-21 years old
43% 22-25 years old
25% 26-29 years old
23% 30 years old and older

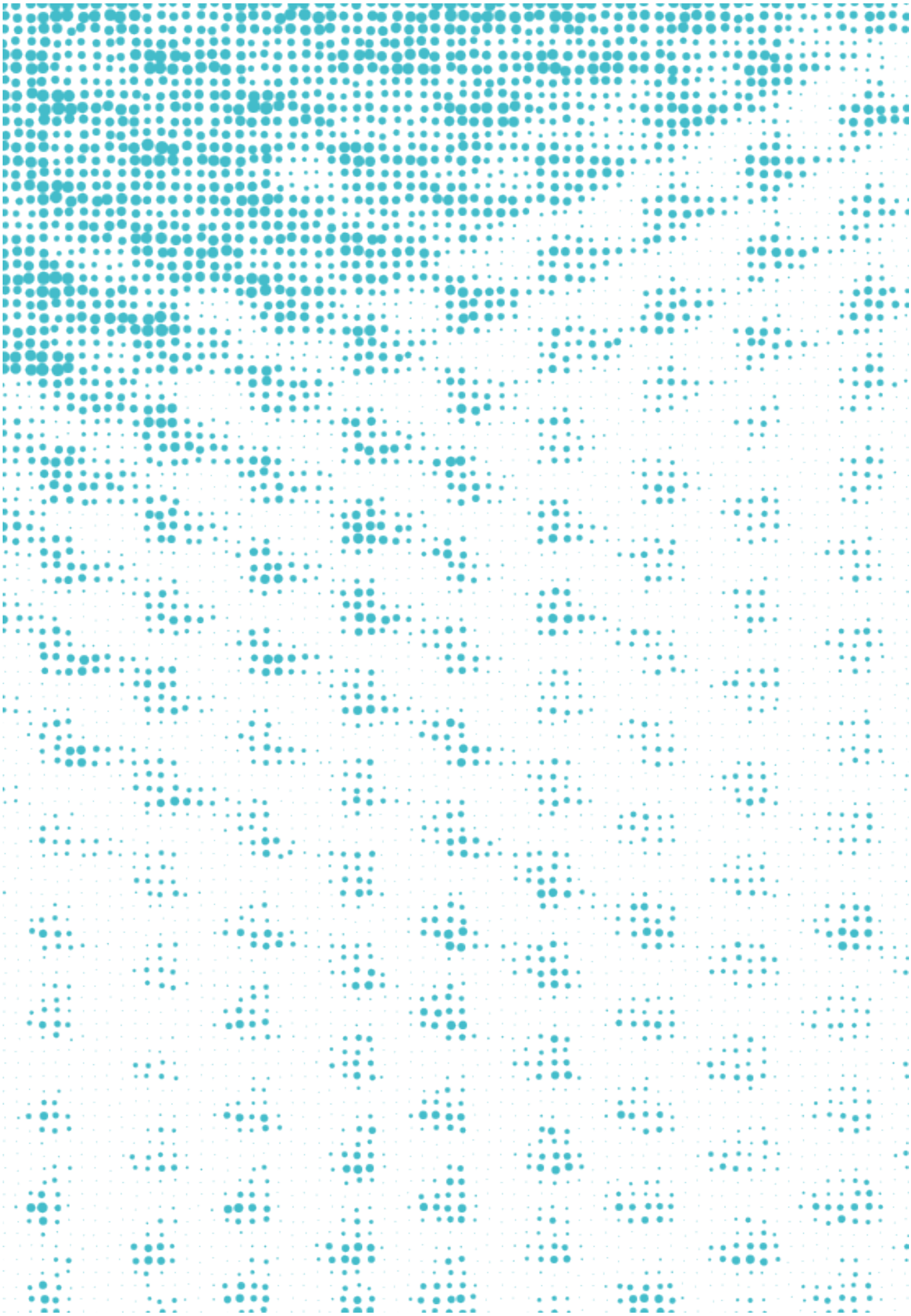
We focused on the Northern and East Coast regions, as these areas have a historical political rivalry between the two major Malay political parties, UMNO and PAS. These are also states with a Malay-majority population, typically known as the **'Malay Heartlands'**.

These are areas where Malay-Muslim concerns in politics and democracy are likely to be salient and have substantial weightage on electoral decision-making.



A difference was observed in the number of female and male participants during the sampling process. Although the research team made an effort to recruit and engage with female participants, IMAN faced challenges in getting female participants to commit to interviews or focus-group discussions. This was likely due to the data collection team being made primarily of male researchers, and potential female participants were less comfortable engaging directly with those from the opposite gender, especially in one-on-one interview settings. A second limitation was also the difference in the geographical distribution of the participants. This was due to the participants' availability to attend the interviews, as part of the data collection period occurred during university semester holidays or exam seasons. We acknowledge these limitations.

The analysis was conducted with a small team of coders. The data was analysed using thematic analysis, which helps identify key themes and patterns in data. The thematic analysis allows for more generalised patterns to be theorised from large data sets, such as interviews. The research team analysed each interview carefully to derive insights and collect them using a large thematic pattern. The team regularly shared findings, combined themes, and discussed more significant issues. This methodology, which combines in-depth interviews with thematic analysis of the data, produces insights that allow for a deeper understanding of experiences and perspectives. Compared to a quantitative survey, which, while helpful in producing measurable data, is not designed to interpret the meanings behind social phenomena. This methodology, therefore, makes this approach valuable as a means to understand the socio-political and cultural contours of society.





Section 1: What Malay youth are worried about

"Banyak belia boleh dianggap sebagai miskin tegar di Kedah. Kos sara hidup tinggi tapi gaji masih rendah. Kalau nak cerita pasal pekerjaan, banyak yang turun ke Selatan [i.e. Pulau Pinang, Kuala Lumpur, Johor]... Di sini [Kedah], gaji rendah, peluang pekerjaan sangat rendah, ataupun tahap gaji yang diminta kena reject. Jadi, keusahawanan jadi pilihan default. Tapi itulah, kos operations mahal dan akhirnya banyak anak muda hijrah ke luar negeri kerana ada peluang yang lebih baik di sana."

An uncertain economic future

All participants agreed that the economy, both current and future, was of significant concern. Their economic concerns can be understood in three broad categories: 1) increased cost of living, 2) stagnant wages, and 3) a challenging employment market. Participants reported experiencing increased costs of goods and services, as well as higher property rental rates. The discussion on the increased cost of living primarily focused on consumer spending on food and beverages, as well as the prices of everyday essentials.

Regarding the discussion on wages, participants noted that wages, particularly for recent graduates, are low and have remained stagnant for years. Despite the government implementing a progressive wage policy to increase the minimum wage to RM 1,700,[2] many youths expressed that current salaries were not keeping pace with the increasing cost of living. This has led them to feel that they lack spending power. Stagnant or low wages also become an additional stressor for those who shared that they graduated with student debt, the second most common debt among youths aged 20-29 years old.[3]

[2] Azhar, D. and Tang, A. (2024). Malaysia to widen tax net, raise minimum wages in 2025 as budget spending hits record. Reuters. Available from: https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/malaysia-plans-record-budget-spending-2025-reforms-boost-revenue-2024-10-18/

[3] Agensi Kaunseling dan Pengurusan Kredit. (2018). Financial Behaviour and State of Financial Well-being of Malaysian Working Adults. Kuala Lumpur: Agensi Kaunseling dan Pengurusan Kredit. Available from: https://www.akpk.org.my/sites/default/files/2024-06/AKPK_Financial-20Behaviour-20and-20State-20of.pdf

This brought the discussion to the employment market. Many participants expressed that it is difficult to enter employment. They were concerned about what they perceived as rising youth unemployment despite government statistics indicating that unemployment rates have been steadily decreasing (3.2% at the time of writing) since the end of the COVID-19 pandemic. This sentiment of a challenging employment market was common among participants outside the Klang Valley, with some suggesting urban-rural economic or development inequality. This inequality is reflected in the statistics of social problems such as drug abuse or sexual crimes that are more prevalent in rural areas due to the de-emphasising of agriculture (therefore, the reduction of employment opportunities) and a lack of focused development in these areas.[4][5]

In states such as Kedah or Perlis, most of the employment market is with the local or state authorities. Participants shared how entry into civil service employment was gatekept or controlled-limiting youth employment to a private sector that was often limited and underpaid, or forcing youths to embrace entrepreneurship without a promise of a stable income. This has also led many youths to enter the informal and unskilled gig market despite earning undergraduate degrees. As a result, many participants believed that the education system urgently needed reform to address the gap between the employment market's needs and broader national economic demands. These are among the economic factors that create the perception of inequality, and consequently, the politics of resentment.

Additionally, there is an observation here where participants map their economic anxieties onto the Malaysian economic outlook. This is despite Malaysia's economy being projected to improve in the coming years, given a steadily increasing GDP, improving employment market, and controlled inflation levels.[6] Therefore, while contradictory to economic data, the participants' views reveal a more profound anxiety surrounding a mismatch between their socioeconomic reality, when compared to macroeconomic data, and announced government initiatives. There is a broader indication of resentment along class lines that feeds into the belief that economic uptrends primarily benefit the urban capitalist elite, while the average Malaysian struggles with financial precarity.

[4] Malay Mail. (2025). Saifuddin Nasution: Drug use worst in Kelantan, Terengganu, Perlis, Kedah. Malay Mail. Available from: https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2025/02/27/saifuddin-nasution-drug-use-worst-in-kelantan-terengganu-perlis-kedah/168089

[5] Osman, H. (2023). Alarming level of rape cases among juveniles in Kedah. NST Online. Available from: https://www.nst.com.my/news/crime-courts/2023/11/977056/alarming-level-rape-cases-among-juveniles-kedah

[6] Bank Negara Malaysia. (2024). BNM Quarterly Bulletin: Q3 2024. Kuala Lumpur: Bank Negara Malaysia.

Political apathy and polarisation

Apathy

Some participants expressed that they had become disinterested in politics for two main reasons: the first was due to what they perceived as endless fighting among the political class, mainly between the government and the opposition. Around the time of the interviews, there were news reports on several *Langkah* or (political) moves orchestrated by the opposition to unseat the ruling government. This was confirmed in a statement by Kedah Chief Minister Sanusi Md Nor, who claimed that Perikatan Nasional, since the 2023 state elections, has been actively planning to use 'democratic' means to gain power in Putrajaya.[7] The opposition was perceived as lacking seriousness in their role as a check and balance against the government, and instead appeared to be obsessed with obtaining power.

Participants felt serious discussions on governance and policy were lacking because the opposition focused on unseating the government. On the other hand, the government was preoccupied with defending itself against the opposition instead of governing. This state of constant political skirmish is what participants perceive as 'political instability', which they believe affects economic stability because investors or businesses cannot operate effectively in an unstable environment, with little focus on policy development and implementation.

The second reason for apathy is that the youths believe their promises were broken. During Pakatan Harapan's tenure as the opposition, the coalition had promised sweeping institutional reforms and economic improvements if they were to come into power. Many participants expressed disappointment that the government had broken their promise on reforms, citing how the Deputy Prime Minister and UMNO President Ahmad Zahid Hamidi was either discharged or acquitted of his many corruption charges pre-16th General Elections.[8] Despite the current government being a 'unity government', participants focused on the Pakatan coalition's past statements on reform. They compared it to the situation where Pakatan had made political concessions to their Barisan Nasional partners.

[7] Yamin, E.A. (2024). Kecoh Langkah Dubai, Langkah Chow Kit, 8 MP BERSATU ada 'langkah' lain? Berita Harian. Available from: https://www.bharian.com.my/berita/nasional/2024/01/1196743/kecoh-langkah-dubai-langkah-chow-kit-8-mp-bersatu-ada-langkah-lain

[8] Astro Awani. (2023). Ahmad Zahid granted discharge not amounting to acquittal of all 47 charges. Astro Awani. Available from: https://international.astroawani.com/malaysia-news/ahmad-zahid-granted-discharge-not-amounting-acquittal-all-47-charges-435768

Polarisation

When expressing their economic concerns, some participants tied this uncertainty to the instability caused by fighting among the political class. There is a belief that if the government is too focused on dealing with issues of politics rather than policy and governance, this affects how investors consider investing in the Malaysian economy. This political instability extends to polarisation not just among the political class but also among the Malaysian public.

> *"Kita lihat bagaimana banyak isu di-politik-kan seperti kes Nik Elin dan Mahkamah Shariah, atau isu ekonomi seperti kadar OPR. Anak muda tak dapat maklumat yang tepat kerana dipengaruhi political extremism."*

Some participants claim that public issues concerning ethnicity, religion, politics, or the economy are often communicated on multiple fronts, i.e., through media and political actors in a polarising manner. This affects the broader Malay youth population, who may not be well-exposed to current affairs or rely on very selective sources for their news. This prompted some participants to believe that, by and large, Malaysian youths were ill-prepared to vote in the 15th General Elections due to their lack of political education literacy. This has caused political discussions among youths to centre on political parties or figures instead of policy.

Political polarisation also affects Malaysian unity. Many youths shared how the constant fighting among the political class shows that neither party is committed to unity and the broader betterment of the country.



Pakatan Harapan Mega Rally

Distrust in government and governance

Most youths expressed dissatisfaction and distrust towards the government due to a lack of good governance. Many participants shared how accessing institutional resources, such as government aid, was difficult. Some participants engaged in entrepreneurship shared how they do not get any form of support from the government, and how announcements of such support are usually not made accessible on the ground level. Additionally, bureaucracy, corruption, and lack of oversight hampered requests to meet basic needs. Many participants shared that the government and local authorities do not prioritise developing basic needs, such as infrastructure. As one respondent from Sabah, currently studying on the East Coast, makes a comparison:

> *"Kita ambil isu jalan di Sabah. Jalan di Sabah berlubang teruk! Dalam setahun, tak ada apa-apa perubahan. Tapi bila [mantan] Agong datang semasa Jelajah Borneo, jalan itu tetiba elok. Boleh disiapkan dalam masa dua, tiga hari… Tapi di Kuala Lumpur, dalam 5 jam selepas aduan, boleh diperbaiki. Jadi saya musykil bagaimana dana yang dah diperuntukkan diguna oleh kuasa tempatan. Kerajaan dah bagi duit, tapi tak terhasil."*

There is an understanding among the participants that local authorities and agencies or state governments may not necessarily reflect the policy priorities of the federal government. However, the lack of good governance at the local level reflects a larger governance culture that is troubled by apathy, corruption or cronyism. Some youths claim corruption remains prevalent regardless of which political party or leadership is in power.

On discussing equitable approaches to governance, some participants share that the current federal government is unfair in treating states not led by the Pakatan Harapan-Barisan Nasional coalition. One of the issues raised is the right of state governments, particularly those on the East Coast, to their oil royalties. Although in April 2024, the government finally paid out oil royalties to both PAS-led Kelantan and Terengganu states, this belief has persisted due to decades of the federal government denying opposition states oil royalties within their regional borders.[9]

In states like Terengganu, youths share that the private sector market is largely undeveloped, with many choosing instead to aim for the Oil & Gas industry. This, however, is a perception that is formed through the lack of comprehensive government

[9] Nyen Yiau, C. (2024). Putrajaya pays oil royalty totalling RM230.9m to Terengganu, Kelantan. The Edge Malaysia. Available from: https://theedgemalaysia.com/node/707403

public communication. Agencies such as the East Coast Economic Region Development Council (ECERDC), which focuses on developing the broader East Coast region, have been in existence for over a decade since its conception under the former Barisan federal government.[10] In this regard, former Prime Minister Najib Razak's economic policies on the East Coast, particularly through infrastructural projects such as the East Coast Railway Line (ECRL), which benefited the East Coast states, were praised. They were seen as developmental policies with a more significant national interest in mind, even if the opposition-led Kelantan state was not part of the then-Barisan Nasional government.

Importance of Islam and Malay identities

When it came to questions of ethno-religious identities, some youths shared their concerns that Malay youths, in general, were not serious about Islam or Malay unity. There was a belief that the Islamic foundation, whether in terms of *jati diri* or cultural identity, alongside religion-led morality, was not strong among Malay youths. This is exemplified by sections of the Malay public who opposed amendments to the Act 355, which would have allowed broader punishment powers to the Sharia Courts. Around the time of the interviews, the Nik Elin case, where a lawyer challenged sections of the Kelantan Syariah Criminal Enactment as unconstitutional, was widely discussed as an example where Islam's status in the Malaysian legal and sociopolitical system was polarised. Islam, as the religion of the federation, was seen to be constantly disrespected not only by Non-Muslims but also by Malay-Muslims themselves.

Some participants attributed this to the mainstreaming of Western ideologies like liberalism among the Malaysian public and how that affects the thinking and approach towards Islam as a religious structure that is meant to guide every aspect of life. This accusation was extended to Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, who some youths claim to be liberal or at least took a liberal approach towards interpreting Islam. Some participants also shared concerns that Anwar Ibrahim was seen as a pluralist and cautioned Malaysia from going into the same trajectory as Indonesia, where all religions are treated on similar grounds. The concern over Western ideologies integrating into the socio-political and cultural fabric ultimately came down to the fear that Islam would lose its status as the country's official religion. For some participants, the Democratic Action Party (DAP) was also seen as an agitator and a threat to Islam.

[10] East Coast Economic Region Development Council. (2009). 103 Projects Implemented At Economic Corridors, Says Najib. East Coast Economic Region Development Council. Available from: https://www.ecerdc.com.my/news/103-projects-implemented-at-economic-corridors-says-najib/

Tense relationship between ethnic groups

When it came to the question of inter-ethnic relationships among major groups, most participants were concerned with growing tensions between the non-Malay and Malays. A participant pointed out how the voting results reflect this tension and polarisation:

> *"Kalau kita lihat PRN, undi Cina pergi ke DAP sejak 2008 lagi. Dalam pilihanraya yang terbaru pula, 70% Melayu mengundi Perikatan Nasional. Situasi ini menimbulkan kebimbangan kerana dah boleh nampak ia ke arah ekstremisme".*

Some participants also believe that there is a lack of engagement or socialisation among the different ethnic groups, resulting in ongoing tension and frequent misunderstandings. In some discussions, participants attributed this to the existing education system that separated young Malaysians and resulted in ethnic polarisation. Issues with the education system will be explored further in the following section.



Church in Selangor

Problem with the current education system

Not meeting economic realities

> *"Anak muda tak percaya terhadap pendidikan kerana tak nampak kepentingannya. Tak kisah lah apa latar belakang seseorang—job market tak bagus, gaji tak baik mana pun. Akhirnya belia tersidai dengan hutang PTPTN."*

Many participants agreed that education reform was necessary and that the state of the Malaysian education system did not address the current economic landscape and objectives of nation-building. Some participants raised a recent report that stated youths were uninterested in pursuing further education, diagnosing this as due to disillusionment.[11]

There is a belief that the education system does not address the demands of the current economy. This has prompted some sections of the youth to enter the informal economy, specifically the gig economy, which offers low social mobility and lacks comprehensive social protection. Some participants also blame social media influencers for presenting 'influencing' and content creation as lucrative careers without broader considerations for economic demand or the spillover benefits of further education, such as developing soft skills or the theoretical knowledge and practices of economic industries.


Small Enterprise Businesses

[11] MalaysiaNow (2023). Only half of SPM candidates plan to continue studying, survey shows. MalaysiaNow. Available from: https://www.malaysianow.com/news/2023/03/29/only-half-of-spm-candidates-plan-to-continue-studying-survey-shows

A system that divides instead of uniting

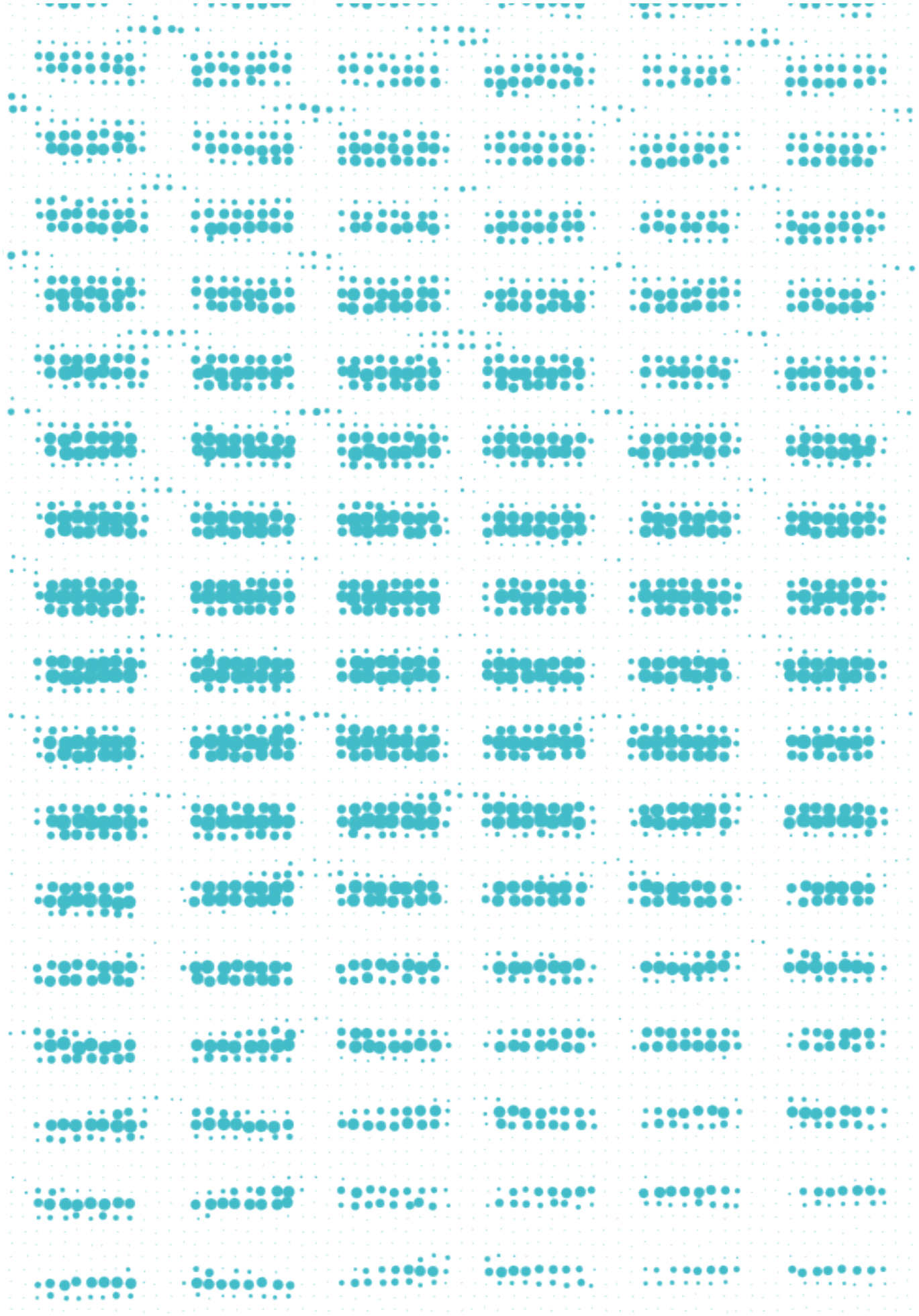
Some participants shared how the current primary and secondary education system does not address nation-building or political literacy. Participants claim that the lack of understanding of Malaysia's socio-political system, institutions, and structure contributes to youths being easily influenced by bad faith or opportunistic political actors. Another aspect of the education system that participants criticised was how it was not aimed towards Malaysian nation-building.

> *"Situasi [polarisasi] ini bukan sebab politik tetapi lebih kepada sistem pendidikan sejak Merdeka. Sejak Merdeka, Malaysia tak berjaya tubuhkan satu identiti. Semua kaum bawa identiti dan worldview masing-masing… Sistem pendidikan tak disatukan untuk perpaduan. Kanak-kanak tak bergaul dari daripada sekolah sampailah ke universiti swasta. Tiada interaksi [dengan kaum lain]. Ini lah warisan tinggalan penjajah".*

In broader discussions about inter-ethnic relationships, national belonging and identity, many participants agree that the education system is crucial in shaping youth worldviews and its long-term importance in creating a cohesive idea of Malaysia. This perspective, however, often led to a discussion about vernacular schools and their role in this ecosystem.



The Election Season



Section 2: Democracy and Governance

Voting as a reflection of aspirations

"Mengundi bukan hanya pasal parti politik. Ia juga mencerminkan visi sejagat untuk negara. Jadi mengundi ini menjadi tanggungjawab besar untuk memilih masa depan kita."

Democracy enables aspirations, but concerns about political fractures

Participants viewed voting as a crucial aspect of the democratic process. They generally agreed that voting is a right that allows them to collectively elect political representatives who voice their concerns and aspirations at the national level. This collective choice reflected their hopes for a positive direction in the country. Some participants reflected on how democracy, as a political system, has brought about progress and development. Others noted that democracy, through voting, serves as a means to achieve common goals, with some referencing the 2018 General Elections, in which the Barisan Nasional government was replaced due to revelations of corruption linked to the 1MDB scandal and widespread dissatisfaction with the government's direction in governance.

As an extension of this, participants understood the voting process as a tool to choose and elect their leadership. Many participants stressed the importance of choosing a qualified and ideologically aligned candidate. There is also an acknowledgement that voting is not only a tool to enforce accountability but also one to use for democratic trial and error. As one participant says:

"Demokrasi baik sebenarnya. Kita sebagai rakyat ada hak. Dalam 5 tahun kebelakangan ini, dari tak baik, boleh jadi baik. Ia membolehkan kita untuk cuba parti lain. Sebab kalau tak ada perubahan, kita [boleh mengundi untuk] lihat perubahan baru."

A maturing democracy

In this regard, while the change of government in 2018 brought about socio-political and economic uncertainty, participants reflected on how the peaceful transition between governments and multiple Prime Ministers, during the COVID-19 pandemic, displayed the political maturity of the democratic landscape

> *"Demokrasi lebih subur lepas Najib [Barisan Nasional] jatuh. Antara 2018 dan 2022, kita bertukar sehingga tiga Perdana Menteri! Pengalihan kuasa antara ketiga-tiga PM ini boleh dikatakan aman dan stabil. Tak ada perang. Boleh nampak ada kematangan politik di sini."*

As explained by some participants, developments over the past few years since 2018 have allowed Malaysians and their democratic system to evolve, and consequently, enlivened the political landscape. However, despite observing a maturing, peaceful democracy, participants agreed that overall stability is necessary and that tolerance must be practised as a collective virtue.

What democracy offers

Participants displayed a breadth of understanding of democratic institutions and what the political system offers. Many participants discussed the Federal Constitution, stating that it is the foundational document for how the country is governed and how citizens should relate to one another. In this regard, the Federal Constitution, apart from being an aspirational document, also sets up guardrails and defines the limits of how Malaysian democracy operates. As an extension of this discussion, some participants raised the question of the Malaysian social contract, a commonly-cited arrangement between Malay and Non-Malay communities on the constitutionally-provisioned position of Malay institutions.[12] These participants saw the social contract as a means of managing the more 'liberal' tendencies of democracy (a discussion point that will be explored in more detail later in this report) and ensuring the protection of socio-cultural norms.



Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin

Additionally, some participants shared how the 2020 Sheraton Move, a political power re-arrangement that led to the fall of the Pakatan Harapan government, allowed for the maturation of democratic institutions, necessitating improvements

[12] Azfar, M.R. et al. (2024). The Malaysian Social Contract: A Historical Perspective. Journal of Ecohumanism, 3(3), pp.150–160.

to the political system via the Anti-Party Hopping Law to prevent party hopping, as what happened during the Sheraton Move.[13] As explained by a participant:

> *"Sistem demokrasi bagus sebab ia semakin berkembang. Kita ambil contoh: kalau tak ada orang [politik] lompat parti, maka tak ada lah undang-undang [Akta Anti Lompat Parti] yang digubal. Sekarang kita ada kawalan yang sepatutnya."*

Participants also shared how the democratic space must ensure Malaysians' right to freedom of expression. While participants generally agreed that ensuring freedom of expression was a democratic right, others clarified that this freedom must also come with responsibility, and, in the participants' terms, restrictions on sensitive subjects (within reason).

The weaknesses of democracy

Despite the general agreement with democracy as a political system, some participants believed that the system, as it were, was broken. The multiple change of leadership post-Sheraton Move was often cited as an example of the weaknesses of the democratic system.

> *"Kita hanya demokrasi pada nama. Sistem ini tak stabil sehingga berlaku peralihan kuasa sebanyak tiga kali; tiga Perdana Menteri dalam tempoh yang pendek. Di sini kita boleh nampak yang orang [politik] boleh memanipulasi demokrasi, dan ia tak stabil."*

Some participants also saw the representative nature of the democratic system as detrimental, particularly to the Malay community. They cited the varying Malay-Muslim political parties and how such fragmentation diluted the overall political power of the Malay-Muslim constituency. This refers to how, leading up to the 14th General Elections in 2018, parties were splintering from major legacy parties, such as UMNO and PAS, which split into Bersatu and Amanah, respectively, due to internal political shifts within the parties. As it stands now, seven political parties capture the varying ideologies or political leanings of the Malay-Muslim votership.[14] This fragmentation, however, is viewed as problematic. As one participant shares:

[13] Razak, S.A. (2024). Syor akta lompat parti diperhalusi tutup ruang 'tebuk atap'. Berita Harian. Available from: https://www.bharian.com.my/rencana/komentar/2024/01/1199991/syor-akta-lompat-parti-diperhalusi-tutup-ruang-tebuk-atap

[14] Azuddin, A. (2024). The myth of Malay ideological unity. Malaysiakini. Available from: https://www.malaysiakini.com/columns/701868

"Kita perlukan dua parti sahaja. Tengok sekarang, ada berapa puluh parti. Bila ada banyak, ia mengurangkan kekuatan kita. Pendaftaran parti [baru Melayu-Islam] patut diharamkan sebab ia membuat orang Melayu pening."

Additionally, some participants believed that Malaysian democracy requires better processes, especially regarding political integrity and money politics. As of February 2025, the government has been actively working to table a Political Financing Bill that would address the question of transparency via 'public funding for political parties, donation limits, and the regulatory body overseeing political financing'.[15]



Dato' Seri Anwar Ibrahim gathering of REFORMASI movement at his house in 2022

[15] Amin, L. (2025). Govt to hold talks with political parties on Political Financing Bill to resolve key issues. The Edge Malaysia. Available from: https://theedgemalaysia.com/node/745697

How the government is performing

Criticisms of 'tatakelola'

Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's key phrase upon taking office in 2022 was to reform Malaysia's governance, or *tatakelola*. This supposedly encompassed reforms in how institutions functioned, the philosophy behind good governance, and making operations more efficient-alongside combating corruption.[16] This was encapsulated under the 'Malaysia MADANI' framework, which also became the government's political slogan. Participants, however, were not convinced by the government's commitment to good governance, citing instances of multiple politicians with corruption charges being dropped.

Many participants discussed how the government was seen to be partisan; discriminating against opposition parties and states governed under Perikatan Nasional. Among examples cited was how opposition elected representatives were denied constituency allocations despite Pakatan policymakers (now government) themselves championing for equal allocations when they were in the opposition.[17]

> *"Kerajaan sekarang tak laksanakan janji manifesto dan pendirian mereka sebelum ini. Sebagai contoh, kita lihat bagaimana mereka menggunakan federalisma, di mana kerajaan persekutuan tak nak berikan peruntukan kepada negeri [pembangkang]. Kita lihat juga bagaimana MP pembangkang tak diberi peruntukan, sedangkan rakyat negeri itu yang membayar cukai. Tetapi peruntukan untuk negeri itu tak dilunaskan dan akhirnya, ada pembangunan yang tak seimbang antara negeri-negeri. Apa dasar kerajaan yang sama rata?"*

In this regard, most participants stated that the government focused more on politicking and punishing the opposition, instead of governing fairly and professionally, bringing tatakelola into question. Beyond withholding constituency allocations, participants cited selective persecution of opposition political figures on corruption charges, while those from the government with similar charges were acquitted or had their cases dropped.

[16] Malaysia MADANI. (2023). Satu Tahun Menyaksikan Kemajuan Pentadbiran Kerajaan MADANI. Malaysia MADANI. Available from: https://malaysiamadani.gov.my/2023/11/satu-tahun-menyaksikan-kemajuan-pentadbiran-kerajaan-madani/

[17] Free Malaysia Today. (2025). PN to send letter to govt on opposition MPs' allocations. Free Malaysia Today. Available from: https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2025/03/13/pn-to-send-letter-to-govt-on-opposition-mps-allocations/

Participants from registered youth organisations also shared their disappointment with how little the government appeared to care for youth development. Several participants who were active members of local youth organisations shared:

> *"Kita tak dapat cukup dana untuk program. Di tahap tempatan, kita boleh kerjasama dengan ADUN. Tapi kalau melalui orang tengah di KBS (Kementerian Belia dan Sukan), dana tak akan sampai. Jadi bila kita ada dana, kita tak mampu buat program, dan akhirnya susah nak cari pelapis. Ada lebih 1,000 organisasi belia yang berdaftar tapi hanya 15 yang aktif. Kita mewakili akar umbi tapi tak di-endah."*

Restrictions on freedom of expression

The lack of youth programmes is an extension of broader restrictions on expression. In discussions, participants often spoke of expression in two terms: 1) cultural and spatial, and 2) political. Culturally and spatially, especially in the Northern states, some participants shared how community spaces that were once hubs for youth activities were being restricted. A participant in Kedah shares:

> *"Perikatan Nasional tak kisah pasal belia. Kita lihat bagaimana Balai Seni di Alor Setar ditutup dan ada sekatan terhadap program seni atau belia."*

This is in reference to a youth festival in 2022, *Muda Mudi Weekend Festival*, where a concert was held, and alleged 'unruly behaviours' of the youth participants led to the Kedah Chief Minister, Sanusi Md Nor, banning concerts from taking place in the state.[18] Some participants expressed frustration with community spaces being heavily vetted by local authorities and how they cannot organise cultural events important to community-building. As another participant shares:

> *"Tak cukup ada ruang online. Ruang offline pun penting. Kita yang tinggal di kawasan rural atau separuh-urban hanya ada pasar karat ataupun surau, masjid."*

The lack of access to these physical or community spaces leads them to find the only remaining space for expression and connection: online, which runs into the following form of restriction.

[18] Malay Mail. (2022). Kedah MB says no to 'unruly' concerts in state, encourages treasure hunts, fishing competitions instead. Malay Mail. Available from: https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2022/10/03/kedah-mb-says-no-to-unruly-concerts-in-state-encourages-treasure-hunts-fishing-competitions-instead/31415

The second form of restriction, which is political, was a sentiment widely shared by most participants. Some participants shared anecdotes about social media content being removed by platforms such as TikTok, some at the request of the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC), and others due to platform moderation. Participants interpreted this as a form of censorship against their political opinions. Among the criticisms against the government was how they broadly used the term 3R-meaning Race, Royalty and Religion to also indiscriminately censure anti-establishment views online. The participants who shared this view did not indicate or produce the said content (for our evaluation) that was allegedly removed.

Since 2022, MCMC has removed 1,993 social media posts deemed 'obscene', although the government did not define what this encompassed.[19] Similarly, TikTok reported that in the first half of 2024, the social media company received 2,606 content removal requests with an 86% removal rate.

Malaysia: TikTok-Government removal request (Jan - Jun, 2024)	
Total request received	2,606
Total content received	8,836
Content actioned due to community guidelines violations	2,229
Content actioned due to local law violations	5,296
Total accounts received	2,822
Accounts actioned due to community guidelines violations	2,080
Accounts actioned due to local law violations	423
Removal rate	86%

Source: TikTok - Tranparency Centre[20]

[19] Iskandar, I.M. and Sallehuddin, Q. (2025). MCMC takes action: 3,670 websites blocked and 1,993 posts removed. NST Online. Available from: https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2025/02/1180093/mcmc-takes-action-3670-websites-blocked-and-1993-posts-removed

[20] TikTok. (2025). Government Removal Requests Report. TikTok Transparency Centre. Available from: https://www.tiktok.com/transparency/en-us/government-removal-requests-2024-1

The gap between power and the people

Among the key complaints regarding the government is the disconnect between the government and the struggles of the common people. Much of this is attributed to the feeling that policymakers don't represent their views, or that their struggles are not treated as a legitimate problem. This translates to the belief that a gap exists between the government and those on the ground. When asked about whether they feel represented, a participant responded:

> *"Tak. Terutamanya di level bawahan. Ini semua berbalik ke political will. Tak ada apa-apa inisiatif atau dasar yang akan dilaksanakan kerana mereka tak peka dengan kesusahan rakyat."*

This gap between the government and the public is seen as one of the causes of the government's lack of effective economic direction. Some participants, particularly those with experience dealing with federal or state agencies, policymakers or political actors, see this as a problem with bureaucracy and the lack of effective communication channels. These participants, who are typically affiliated with civil society organisations (CSOs), shared their experience dealing with bureaucracy at the political or administrative level and their frustration with the process.

> *"Ada kelemahan dalam ketelusan dan komunikasi… Kerajaan boleh memperbaiki engagement; libatkan semua pihak yang berkenaan. Kalau lihat situasi sekarang, saluran PMO [Prime Minister's Office] tak berkesan. Tak ada cara lain ke untuk libat-urus dengan akar umbi? Komunikasi harus distrukturkan supaya suara kita boleh salur ke atas."*

Therefore, the gap between the government and the people is not necessarily seen as a problem of bureaucratic ignorance, but also one of ineffective communication channels. The government uses Jabatan Komunikasi Komuniti or J-KOM, for their strategic communications.[21] The department is a Barisan-era legacy department formerly known as JASA that was abolished in 2018 under the Pakatan 1.0 administration, but revived and rebranded in 2020 by the preceding Muafakat administration.[22] It remains to be seen if J-KOM has successfully communicated government policy to the broader public or adopted strategies to reach the youth constituency effectively.

[21] Astro Awani. (2025). J-KOM terus perkasa peranan sebar dasar kerajaan - KP. Available from: https://www.astroawani.com/berita-malaysia/jkom-terus-perkasa-peranan-sebar-dasar-kerajaan-kp-512367

[22] BERNAMA. (2020). JASA not politically-motivated - KKMM. Kementerian Komunikasi Malaysia. Available from: https://www.komunikasi.gov.my/awam/berita/233-kkd-news/18026-bernama-08-nov-2020-jasa-not-politically-motivated-kkmm

The government communicates ineffectively

Among the key complaints and criticisms levied against the government by participants was the lack of effective communication and engagement with the broader public. This disappointment was expressed most by those who were sympathetic towards the Pakatan-Barisan government, indicating that while they recognised that the government is striving towards improving the lives of Malaysians through socio-economic programmes and policies, it did an inadequate job of communicating these developments. This has led to what participants believed are low take-up rates among the public for the government's big data initiative, Pangkalan Data Utama (PADU), which intended to integrate Malaysian citizens' data from multiple sources to create more effective policies and provide more accurate, targeted interventions.[23] As one participant shares:

> *"Apa yang Kementerian Komunikasi tengah buat?... Contohnya, penerimaan PADU di Perlis sangat rendah. Tak ada komunikasi langsung. Kita perlukan engagement yang lebih baik untuk komunikasi dasar."*

Several participants also touched on the issue of misinformation, indicating that the government's lack of proactiveness in correcting or setting the narrative opened the door for bad-faith actors to shape negative perceptions of government policies or social issues. For example, some participants shared how perceptions surrounding the Nik Elin vs. State Government of Kelantan case-where a lawyer challenged the constitutionality of amendments to the criminal provisions of the state's Syariah laws-were manipulated by bad-faith political actors who framed the case as an 'attack on Islam' and increased encroachment on Islamic and Malay institutions.[24] In this instance, some participants believed that the government could have worked harder to explain to the public: 1) the separation and independence of the judiciary, and 2) how the court decision may, in fact, further strengthen Islamic law instead of weakening it.[25]

[23] Jalli, N. (2025). Big Data, Bigger Debate: Malaysia's PADU System and the Future of Digital Governance. FULCRUM. Available from: https://fulcrum.sg/big-data-bigger-debate-malaysias-padu-system-and-the-future-of-digital-governance/

[24] Azmi, A. (2024). Decision spells further secular encroachment into Malay and Islamic society, says Bersatu. NST Online. Available from: https://www.nst.com.my/news/politics/2024/02/1011607/decision-spells-further-secular-encroachment-malay-and-islamic-society

[25] Yunus, A. (2024). Federal Court's ruling will strengthen Islamic law in Malaysia, says Syariah Judiciary Department. The Star. Available from: https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2024/02/11/federal-court039s-ruling-will-strengthen-islamic-law-in-malaysia-says-syariah-judiciary-department

Lack of economic direction

As discussed in the previous section [see: *What Malay youths are worried about: An uncertain economic future*], participants were generally concerned about their economic futures, ranging from income sustainability to a limited employment market. These concerns were directed towards the perception of a lack of cohesive economic vision from the federal government. Some participants shared their concerns about growing inequality among Malaysians, while others pointed towards the lack of equitable development across the country-the latter citing the government's focus on only developing the Peninsular West Coast and Southern states such as Pulau Pinang, Selangor and Johor, while leaving the Northern and East Coast region undeveloped.

Despite criticisms, other participants who were not politically opposed to the federal government were more optimistic. These individuals shared how the formation of the unity government had brought much-needed political stability, which led to foreign investments in the Malaysian economy. Despite Malaysia registering lower foreign direct investment (FDI) in 2023 at RM40.4 billion compared to the previous year at RM75.4 billion-government efforts throughout 2024 with multinational technology companies such as Google, Microsoft and Oracle fit into the broader MADANI Economy framework as outlined by Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim early in his administration.[26][27] These participants believed that the government should be given the space to perform while stressing the need to communicate these developments.

> *"PMX meluncurkan Ekonomi MADANI. Bukan sahaja naikkan siling tapi lantai sekali. Kita sekarang merasai [bebanan] cukai kerana dah lama sangat selesa dengan subsidi. Tapi ini perubahan yang diperlukan untuk memperbaiki situasi [ekonomi] Malaysia. Subsidi kena bersasar supaya tak ada pembaziran dan kita boleh kurangkan defisit. Kita masih berada di landasan. Walaupun pelaburan dah masuk dan kami belum lihat kesannya [terhadap ekonomi] lagi, stock market menunjukkan situasi ekonomi kita. Ya, ringgit menurun tapi OPR masih kekal stabil… Ini yang patut kita sampaikan kepada rakyat."*

[26] Department of Statistics Malaysia. (2024). Statistics of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in Malaysia 2023. Department of Statistics Malaysia. Available from: https://www.dosm.gov.my/portal-main/release-content/statistics-of-foreign-direct-investment-fdi-in-malaysia-

[27] Lee, E. (2025). Stories Of The Year: A blockbuster year for foreign investment. The Edge Malaysia. Available from: https://theedgemalaysia.com/node/739311

On the point of Ekonomi MADANI, several participants shared how they did not understand what the economic framework intended to achieve, citing the lack of details. It was unclear how the economic roadmap engaged the youth, particularly concerning stagnant wages, the employment market and regional inequality. This, potentially, as discussed earlier, boils down to consistent and clear public communication on key government initiatives, as one participant shares:

> *"Kerajaan baru lancarkan pelan Ekonomi MADANI. Rakyat tak nampak apa yang nak dibuat. Rakyat sepatutnya boleh tegur kerajaan untuk terangkan apa yang nak dibuat. Takut kalau [kebanyakan] yang tak faham, ia boleh menjejaskan kestabilan politik, berikutan persepsi terhadap kerajaan."*



Ekonomi MADANI?

Political actors and how they affect the political landscape

Polarisation and its agitators

> *"Selepas PRU15, ada pihak yang cuba buat benda yang sama [ketidakstabilan politik] dan cuba mainkan perkauman dan agama. Mereka bersikap seperti khawarij, ataupun menjadi pelampau… Lebih kepada memfitnah, tak ada matlamat politik dan hanya fikir kuasa sahaja. Habisnya mereka sebar fitnah dan maklumat tidak betul. Hasilnya ada pertengkaran antara rakyat."*

Khawarij was often used by some participants when referring to what they observed as the current state of socio-political polarisation. In Arabic, the term means to 'those who left', while in the Malaysian context, it refers to Malaysian-Muslims who adopt an ideology of condemning those whom they disagree with politically, to the extent of applying *takfiri*, or accusing other Muslims of apostasy.[28] Some participants blamed political party supporters for their obsession, using the term *wala'*, meaning obedient or loyal in Arabic, to the point of making enemies out of other Malay-Muslims.

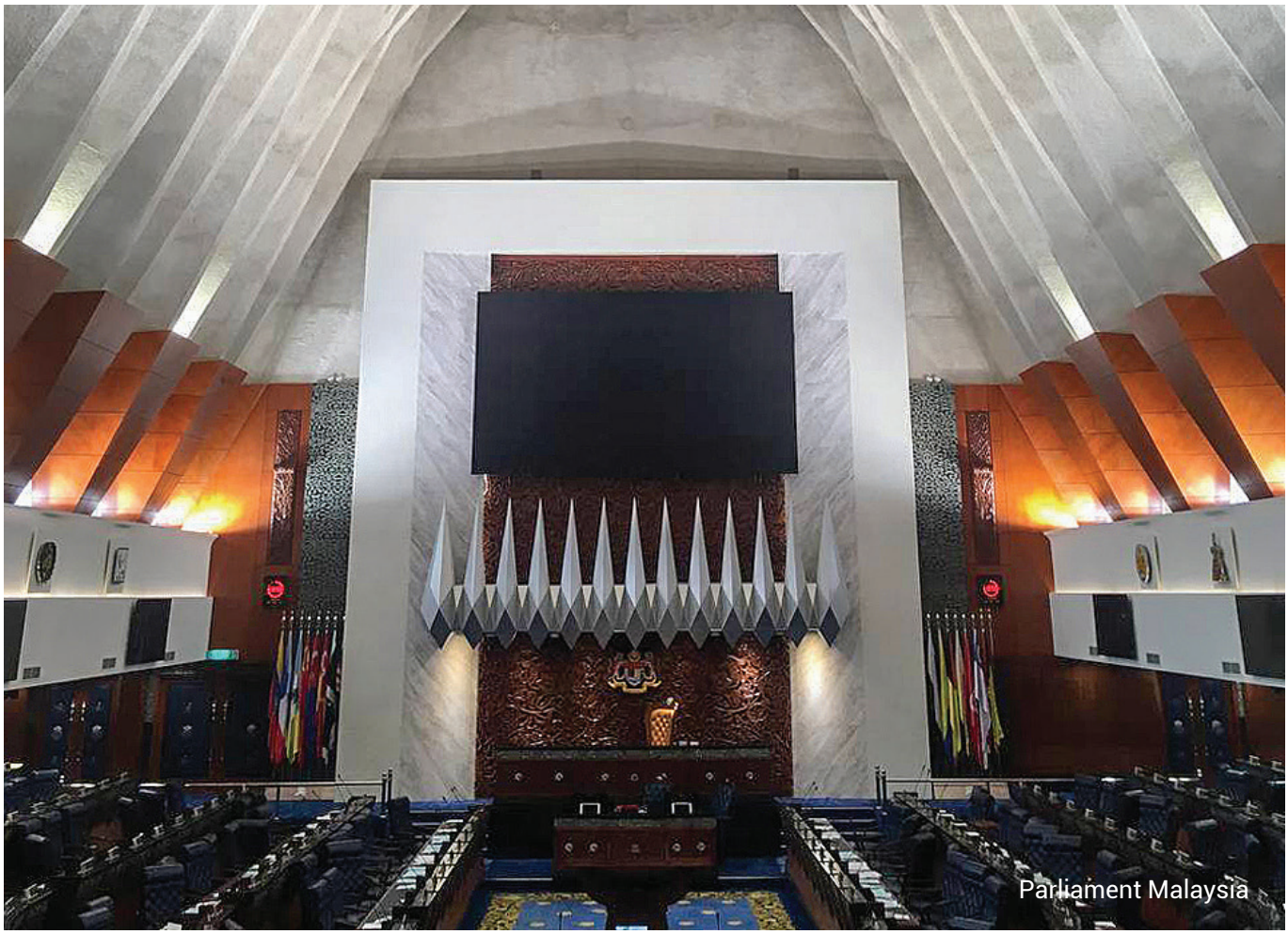
Some participants expressed concern about a potential race riot similar to May 13th 1969, if the relationship between the different ethnic groups is not managed, and *wala'* groups continue to agitate political discourse. However, not all the blame was directed at political party supporters. Some participants directly identified political party representatives, specifically political actors from Perikatan Nasional, as deliberately sowing discord among Malaysians.

> *"Kawan-kawan [non-Muslim] saya sangat terkesan dengan isu perkauman. Perhimpunan 'Selamat Malaysia' menggambarkan seperti Islam diancam. PN memang suka membuat provokasi. Dan kerana PN majoriti-nya Melayu-Islam, ia memberi stereotaip yang negatif [terhadap mereka yang Melayu-Islam].*

In this regard, Perikatan Nasional, as the opposition, was accused by some participants of only gaining political mileage through agitating 3R issues and not performing their role as an opposition that is concerned with national development and policies, or becoming a check-and-balance to issues that matter. Most participants were also critical of Perikatan's weaponisation of religion to fulfil their political agendas. However,

[28] Malay Mail. (2024). Religious affairs minister: Rise of Khawarij, Takfiri ideologies in Malaysia alarming. Malay Mail. Available from: https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2024/03/14/religious-affairs-minister-rise-of-khawarij-takfiri-ideologies-in-malaysia-alarming/123514

some participants were sympathetic towards Perikatan, indicating that the coalition was playing its role in raising important issues related to race or religion.



Parliament Malaysia

Culture of political seniority and the active blocking of youth opportunities

When discussing politics and the place of youths in it, participants generally expressed dissatisfaction with senior politicians, how they felt deliberately excluded from political representation, and how youths were perceived only as vote banks. Participants who have experience being part of political movements shared how "elderly" politicians continue to dominate politics and political discourse. One participant, in particular, says simply:

> *"Kita kena kurangkan orang tua dalam politik."*

Participants also argued that the domination of senior politicians in politics and political discourse also limited youth agency and representation in national discourse. As discussed in the previous section [see: *Is the government doing a good job?*: Restrictions on freedom of expression], youths already believe that their agency and expression have been incrementally reduced in political or socio-cultural aspects. Senior politicians were blamed for lacking any meaningful political platform or space for youth aspirations.

Even in instances where youths are 'seen' to be involved in the political process and are 'represented', some participants are doubtful that the relationship between senior politicians and the youth is genuine or meaningful. A participant active in political movements shares how youth labour is extracted for the benefit of senior politicians' aspirations:

> *"Kalau kita nak bincang pasal penglibatan anak muda dalam politik, ia biasanya dimanipulasikan oleh orang tua. Kita lihat situasi sekarang di mana kita [masih] tak keluar dari politik yang lapuk… Kita tak ada total empowerment, dan masih segmented mengikut isu… Sekarang mereka [anak muda] tengah bekerja dan berfikir untuk parti."*

Another participant who volunteered briefly during the 2023 state elections shares their observation on the extraction of youth labour:

> *"Semasa PRN, anak muda diarah untuk naikkan banner dan bendera [parti], dan jadi driver untuk calon… Tak ada parti yang betul-betul nak empower anak muda."*

Another participant, who is an active political party member based outside the Klang Valley, expressed frustration with the lack of support and resources offered, on top of the lack of mobility within the party:

> *"Pusat tak support. Mereka tinggalkan kami berseorangan dalam battle [semasa pilihanraya]. Tak ada grassroot, tak jaga kebajikan. Kalau lihat ke [Parti] Keadilan, dah lama statik perjawatan. Anak muda [dalam parti] ada 2,000 lebih tapi tak naik jawatan".*

The lack of institutional support and resources becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy (for youth hopefuls) and justification among the senior leadership to not invest further in developing youth leadership. The latter are framed as not to be "winning" candidates, but are expected to defy all odds despite the lack of resources and support from the central party leadership.

More support needed for youth leadership opportunities

Despite this disposition, some participants believed that the way forward was for political parties to offer spaces for youths to be politically active and take up leadership opportunities. Most participants discussing this track of thinking advocated for a

mentorship arrangement between aspiring youths and senior leadership. This, therefore, acknowledges the experience of senior leadership while paving the way for youthful energy and contributions. One participant shares:

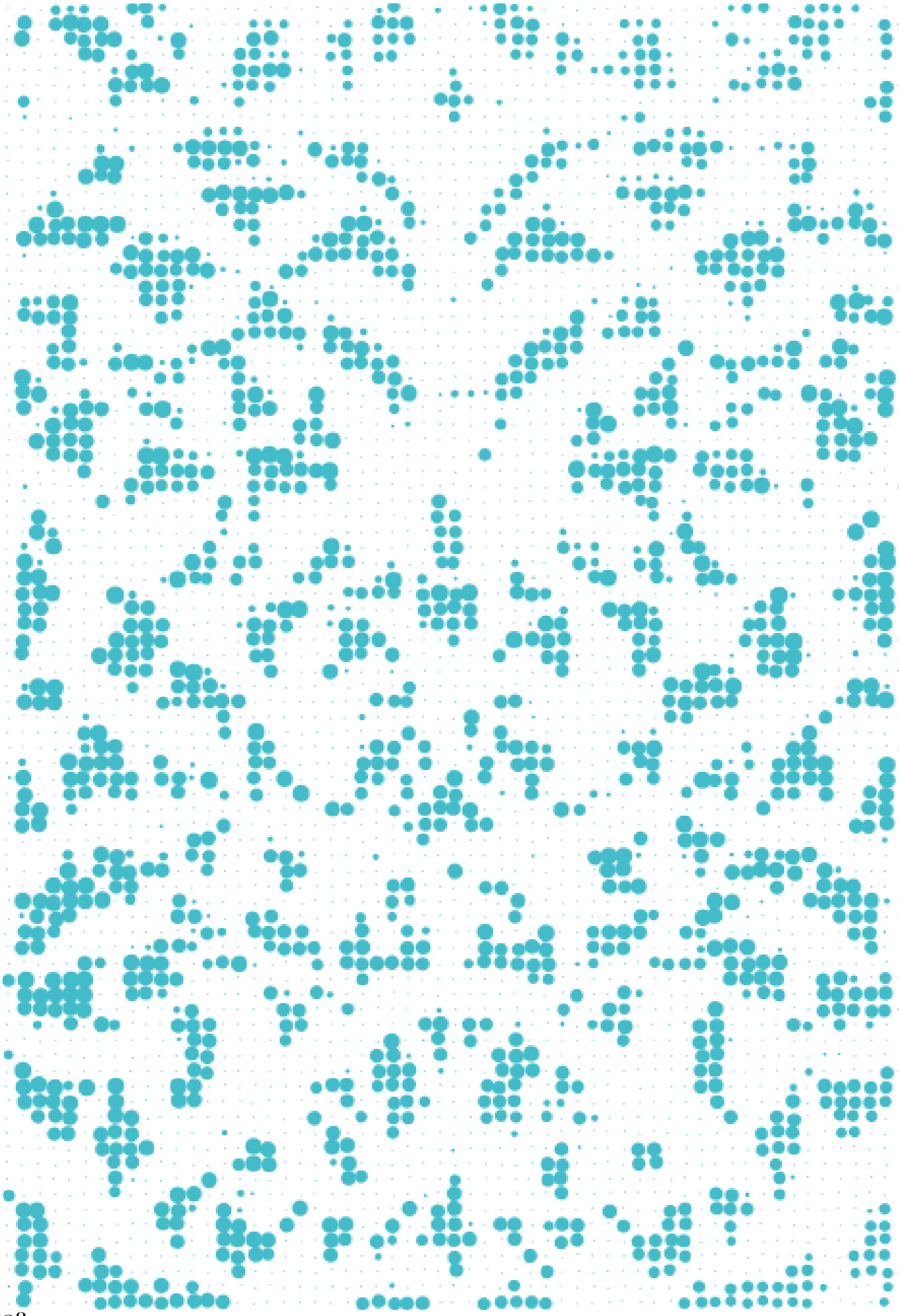
> *"Pemimpin senior kena lah membimbing anak muda. Kena ada pergabungan antara anak muda dan pemimpin tua—perspektif mereka yang berpengalaman dan perspektif anak muda. Inilah yang membentuk dasar-dasar yang lebih menyeluruh. Idea yang baru. Anak muda ini aset kepada negara dan adalah pewaris. Pemimpin tua kena tinggalkan dunia politik dan berikan peluang kepada yang muda."*

Participants active in grassroots and community movements also stressed the importance of involving youths in politics and leadership. This does not necessarily need to be in the form of direct party membership, but can begin through less commitment-heavy but meaningful programmes that directly involve improving their communities. There was an acknowledgement among participants that youth agency is tied to ownership. One way to build a sense of ownership is by integrating this into leadership opportunities within their communities. While this is not strictly the remit of political parties, political platforms are among the more effective means to enable agency.



Enter the Subculture

Conclusively, while not all participants were hostile towards the senior leadership in politics, the frustration emerged from the belief that youth aspirations were not taken seriously, and that youth support was only seen as tokenistic. The lack of a genuine space or platform to express their aspirations and engage meaningfully with political institutions also contributed to this growing frustration.





Section 3: Islam and Politics

"Sarjana Islam dan gerakan politik Islam setuju untuk ambil demokrasi [sebagai sistem] tapi dengan prinsip Islam. Kena ada batas. Kita ambil contoh isu ketelusan atau rasuah. Islam menawarkan penyelesaian kepada kekurangan demokrasi… Kerajaan [demokrasi] yang Islam bermakna kita tak ada [ciri-ciri] sekular atau liberal."

Islam as a framework for socio-political life

In 2022, Merdeka Centre, an opinion research firm, and Sisters in Islam, an Islamic women's rights NGO, published a report on Malaysian Muslim youths.[29] The report found that 'the majority [up to 96%] of the Muslim Youths hold the view that Islam is important in public life', and that being Muslim is an integral part of their identity. The survey participants understood public life in terms of the country's political landscape and institutions. In our focus group discussions, we found this to be true as well, with many participants echoing this belief that the Islamic framework is compatible with democracy:

"Pilihanraya dan separation of powers, ia bertetapan dengan konsep Insaniyah.[30] Ia membebaskan manusia dari ilmu yang tidak benar."

Some participants observed the broader application of Islam in governance and politics materialising through policies that empower Islamic programmes and initiatives. However, some participants stated that individuals, particularly Muslim youths, have a responsibility to promote the Islamization of politics and democracy, viewing it as a moral duty for youths to actively engage in political discourse and deepen their understanding of Islam's influence on socio-political change.

[29] Merdeka Center for Opinion Research and Sisters in Islam. (2022). Highlights of the Muslim Youth Survey. Kuala Lumpur: Merdeka Center for Opinion Research.

[30] Insaniyah is an Arabic word that means 'humanity' and is understood broadly as providence, or interventions by God in the best interest of humankind.

Additionally, participants viewed the Islamic value system as a remedy for the weaknesses of democracy, a system derived mainly from the West (which will be discussed further in the next section). One participant expressed that they recognised how democracy and governance could be incorporated into the Islamic framework:

> *"Sarjana Islam dan gerakan politik Islam setuju untuk ambil demokrasi [sebagai sistem] tapi dengan prinsip Islam. Kena ada batas. Kita ambil contoh isu ketelusan atau rasuah. Islam menawarkan penyelesaian kepada kekurangan demokrasi… Kerajaan [demokrasi] yang Islam bermakna kita tak ada [ciri-ciri] sekular atau liberal."*

Some participants frequently revisit the threat posed by liberalism and secularism, viewing these as by-products of Western democracy. They argue that Malaysia's democratic framework, if genuinely rooted in Islamic principles, must either reject or limit these elements.

The threat of Western ideologies, i.e. liberalism, secularism

Some participants noted that Malaysian democracy and its institutions, while recognising Islam as the 'religion of the Federation', incorporate numerous aspects of Western democracy. They identified liberalism and secularism as key Western ideologies that they felt were at odds with both Islamic principles and broader Malaysian-Asian values. Additionally, most participants conveyed that democracy within the Malaysian context did not grant unrestricted 'rights' and necessitated limitations to mitigate the excesses associated with Western democracy.



2023 Terengganu 15th State Elections

> *"Kita lihat apa jadi bila ada kebebasan total. Adanya propaganda, pengaruh Barat seperti LGBT. Di negara Islam, tiada kebebasan tanpa batas. Kita demokrasi separuh, dan dari segi agama, ia lebih harmoni kerana rakyat tak melampau batas."*

There is a belief that Western-style democracy, alongside liberalism (within the participants' understanding), does not provide the socio-cultural restraint necessary to achieve a 'balanced' society. In this sense, control or limitations, whether socio-cultural or political, are essential to ensure that Malaysian society remains intact. This aspect is significant, as Islamic principles and values are viewed as safeguards against these excesses, such as issues related to gender and sexuality or religious freedom-the latter of which is considered a threat to Malay-Muslim political hegemony. This discussion also extends to the question of human rights. As one participant explains:

> *"Sejauh mana hak asasi manusia ini? Ini yang menjadikan ia bermasalah. Di Barat, hak asasi manusia ini terlalu luas. Kita lihat isu LGBTQ dan feminisma, dan adanya masalah anak luar nikah. Ini merosakkan institusi keluarga dan mampu menjatuhkan sebuah tamadun. Kita perlu berhati-hati."*

Some participants were concerned with what they observed as Malaysians, particularly Malay-Muslim youths who embraced liberal ideology, and how it produced a society that was 'confused'. This was due to liberal ideology corrupting or rejecting their Malay-Muslim or Asian cultural identities, or *'jati diri'*. This understanding of *'jati diri'* is often tied up with Islamic tenets, on subjects of gender, or social issues such as drinking or gambling. Some other participants interpreted this as the corrosion of Malay heritage and cultural appreciation, through practices such as traditional wear, martial arts and defence, or the Malay arts.

However, some participants believed that liberalism was compatible with Islamic values. Although even in this instance, it was qualified in the manner that restrictions, such as on issues of sexuality or secularism, were necessary in embracing liberalism.

> *"Dulu saya takut [dengan liberalisme] kerana ia nampak seperti campurkan agama dan maksiat. Tetapi selepas mendapat penjelasan, saya lihat liberalisme sebagai sikap keterbukaan. Kita terima bangsa lain—itu sudah liberal… Saya tak ada masalah dengan liberalisme. Kita terima selagi tak bertentangan dengan syarak… Kalau nak guna analogi: adat yang bertentangan, kita tolak. Yang baik, kita terima."*

Strengthening Islam in governance

In recognising that Islam is the religion of the Malaysian Federation, some participants also extended this to how the country's institutions and systems must adopt Islamic frameworks. One participant acknowledges that the Federal Constitution and the Malaysian democratic system have their roots in the British framework, and how it limits the influence of Islam in socio-political life:

> *"Sistem politik kita terikat dengan Perlembagaan, jadi implementasi [Islam] dalam sistem ada kekurangan walaupun Islam agama persekutuan. Ia tak dilaksanakan secara menyeluruh, dan ia hanya bagus kalau diimplementasi secara holistik. Dari segi dasar, ya, tapi tak betul-betul diadaptasi di peringkat masyarakat. Ini lah kenapa kumpulan liberal dan sebagainya ada."*

However, while total integration of Islam into governing institutions and legal structures may not be possible, some participants see an opportunity for the government to strengthen institutions such as the Shariah courts. During the period in which the discussions were conducted with participants, the Federal Court recently ruled against amended criminal provisions to Kelantan state's Shariah laws[31]. The case, Nik Elin vs. State Government of Kelantan, and its rulings were exposed as an institutional and political weakness of the Shariah courts (Islamic court of law) against the Federal Constitution (of Western, secular origin). Participants who aligned with this belief saw a necessity in safeguarding Islam through strengthening Islamic institutions, whether it was the Shariah courts, the powers of state Muftis, or the enforcement abilities of state religious authorities.



Perikatan Nasional sermon during Selangor 15th State Elections 2023

[31] Tee, K. (2024). Nik Elin: Federal Court's ruling in Kelantan Shariah criminal provisions a testament to Federal Constitution's supremacy. Malay Mail. Available from: https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2024/02/09/nik-elin-federal-courts-ruling-in-kelantan-shariah-criminal-provisions-a-testament-to-federal-constitutions-supremacy/117204

How Islam is sidelined, and why political power must be in Malay-Muslim hands

Participants critical of the current government, particularly Malay-Muslim politicians, were concerned with elected representatives who were seen to be sidelining issues regarding Malay privileges and Islam. Pakatan Harapan elected officials, in particular, were depicted as being an ally to 'liberal' causes, as one participant explains:

> *"Golongan liberal melantik orang untuk meluluskan permohonan untuk team liberal… Kita lihat bagaimana ruang diberi kepada konsert LGBT, dan sokongan diberi. Ia memberi impak kepada orang Islam. Mujahid [bekas Menteri Agama] sebagai contoh, tak jaga kemuliaan Islam. Dia nak jadi macam Menteri Agama di Indonesia; kita tak boleh jaga semua agama."*

To this end, some participants were concerned with the long-term effects of having political representatives who did not prioritise Malay or Islamic issues, and how it would eventually erode Malay rights and Islamic sanctity in Malaysia. With this in mind, participants stress the importance of supporting political parties or actors that defend and advocate for Malay-Muslim rights and issues. One participant describes the importance of how political power must rest in Muslim hands to achieve the ideal Islamic society:

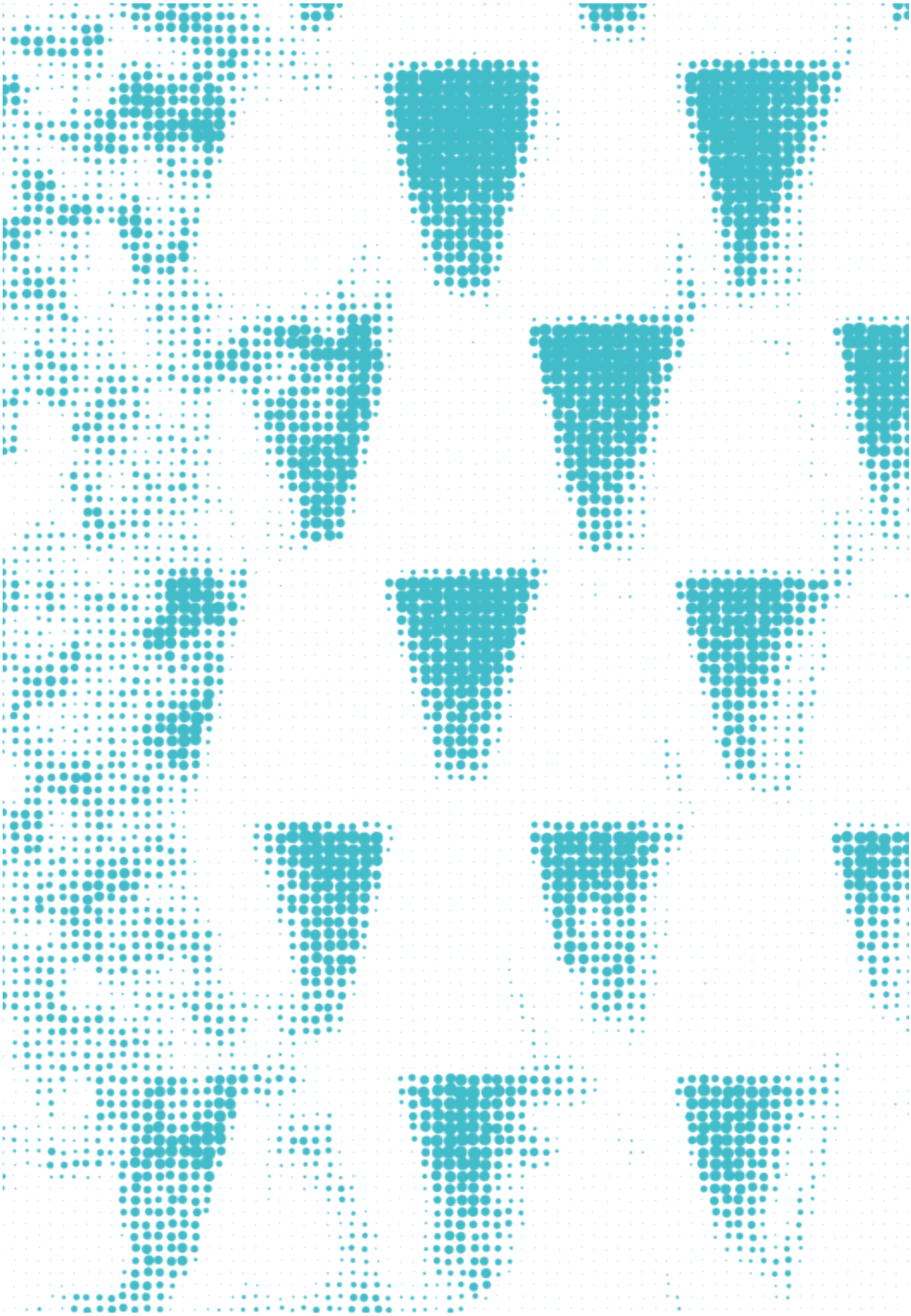
> *"Kita perlu rujuk ke ulama-ulama seperti al-Banna dan al-Maududi.*[32] *Kuasa politik penting untuk dipegang dalam Islam, kerana ia lihat kepada yang kurang mudarat."*

The notion that political dominance must remain in Malay-Muslim leadership is echoed by a few other participants as a means of safeguarding the position of Islam and Malay privileges. One participant derived inspiration from the governance of Madinah during early Islamic history, where Muslim leadership presided over non-Muslims communities, whilst protecting their rights. In the Malaysian context, this materialises as: *"Melayu menjadi teras dan melindungi kaum lain."*



Masjid Sultan Salahuddin Abdul Aziz Shah
Shah Alam, Selangor

[32] al-Banna and al-Maududi were 19th century Muslim scholars that advocated for the total Islamisation of public life, such as political institutions and societal structures as a means to achieve a just society.



Section 4: How youths are involved in democracy and politics

Friends or family

"Ayah saya aktivis PAS, jadi dalam keluarga saya ada perbezaan pandangan. Keluarga saya against apa yang saya fikir. Saya tak ada masalah kalau [mereka] tak terima."

Who shapes the political opinions of youths?

Some participants shared how their political opinions and beliefs are shaped by those closest to them; either family or friends. This echoes a 2023 study by ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, a Singaporean research institute that found Malaysian-Muslim youths adopting similar (conservative) political beliefs as their families, due to the environment set by long-term interpersonal dynamics.[33] In our discussions, participants shared similar reflections. Some participants shared how they actively discussed politics with their families, exchanging opinions about current affairs and political actors.

Other participants shared how their family members were already actively supporting certain political parties, or were active card-carrying members. In some instances, participants carried forward the political beliefs of their family members, supporting the same political party as their parents did. However, there were also participants who, through their own experience and political reasoning, supported different political parties ideologically opposed to their families' choice. One participant supportive of Pakatan shares:

"Ayah saya aktivis PAS, jadi dalam keluarga saya ada perbezaan pandangan. Keluarga saya against apa yang saya fikir. Saya tak ada masalah kalau [mereka] tak terima."

[33] Shukri, S. (2024). Why young Malay voters in Malaysia are "turning green". Singapore: ISEAS Publishing.

In this instance, participants with differing political opinions from those in their circle shared how they do not deeply engage with their family or friends in political discussions, to maintain their relationships.

Political parties, current issues and ideology

While family and friends play a significant role in shaping participants' political opinions, they also owe their political literacy to political developments, political parties themselves, or their beliefs aligning with specific political parties. For example, when it comes to aligned beliefs, participants who supported PAS shared how they believed the Islamist party was the only one that consistently championed Islamic issues. As discussed earlier, with Islam being an important part of Muslim youths' identity, PAS, to some individuals, may appear as the natural political choice. In some instances, however, ideological alignment is not as simple as identity. Some participants described their pathway to PAS through studying materials on political Islam, or joining *usrah*, or religious study group sessions at university. These *usrah* sessions would introduce them to governance and political concepts from an Islamic perspective. For some participants, their upbringing, typically through religious education, primed them to be more readily aligned with PAS.



Perikatan Nasional Selangor State Election 2023 Gathering

However, while aligned beliefs led some participants to support PAS, others expressed how they moved away from PAS to supporting other political parties over time. These participants observed how the Islamist party incrementally adopted more hardline, 'extremist' views, which they disagreed with. PAS and their members' perspectives on religion also made some participants uncomfortable due to what they saw as a myopic and exclusivist understanding of Islam. And more concerningly, how the party mapped these beliefs into the country's politics.

Apart from aligned beliefs, other participants also shared political 'events' that shaped their political beliefs. For example, a participant shared how the Reformasi movement in the late 1990s and early 2000s was pivotal to their political awakening. They witnessed how the Barisan Nasional government regularly persecuted the then-opposition, leading them to support either Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) or PAS out of a sense of justice.

Similarly, some participants shared how they were 'politically fluid'-their support shifting depending on the political landscape. As a salient example, one participant detailed the evolution of their political support. In their schooling years, they supported PAS due to attending Islamic education. In university, however, they joined UMNO due to broader familial influence, but eventually rejected and left the party because of the implementation of the Goods and Services Tax (GST), and the exposé of the 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) scandal. During the COVID-19 pandemic, they became supportive of the Muafakat Nasional government but rescinded support after what was perceived to be a series of policy missteps in the handling of the pandemic. The participant currently does not find themselves aligned to any particular party and maintains their position as an 'observer'.



A Wayang Kulit setup

Social media and building political literacy

Social media as an engagement platform

Much of the research and analysis on youths in the 15th General Elections concerns how social media influenced political opinions and voting decisions. The role of TikTok, the popular video platform, has particularly interested researchers. Merdeka Centre's 2024 National Youth Survey found that 25% of the respondents were active on TikTok, with cohorts under 20 years old spread evenly across TikTok and Instagram-both platforms utilising video. 11% of the respondents polled were interested in political topics.[34]

In our discussions with youth respondents, their information and news sources were crucial in understanding how their political opinions were shaped. Most respondents shared that they get their political or current affairs developments online, spread between social media and dedicated news portals. One respondent shared how "back then", political information usually came from single sources such as family or established media, i.e. newspapers and broadcasting companies. Some have viewed these established media as unreliable due to perceptions of bias and restrictions linked to government regulations and funding. However, this does not mean that news from established media is disregarded; only that established news media supplements or verifies the (political) content consumed on social media platforms.

Some participants shared that social media, besides enabling them to become more informed on political developments, also allows them to share these developments with their friends or family-thus creating a chain of awareness. Some participants frame this as dakwah, which, while understood more broadly as preaching, is seen as spreading (political and democratic) awareness and enlightenment. There were sections of participants who, while not actively discussing current affairs or political developments with their families-were active in 'passively' sharing political content among their social media circles as a form of amplification.

Moreover, social media is also seen as accessible, given ubiquitous access to smartphones, especially among digitally connected youths. This is due to the fact that social media platforms are free and offer their users a space for expression. As the aforementioned Merdeka Centre report shows, while political content makes up 11% of the topics favoured, youths also use these platforms for other topics of interest, such as sports, lifestyle, skills development, etc.[35] Information is easily accessible to users,

[34] Merdeka Center for Opinion Research. (2024). National Youth Survey 2024. Kuala Lumpur: Merdeka Center for Opinion Research. Available from: https://merdeka.org/national-youth-survey-2024/.
[35] ibid

should they know more about a specific subject. The perceived 'neutrality' and openness of social media platforms also allow users to explore multiple aspects of an issue. This, in part, also underscores the exasperation some respondents felt when the government was seen censoring political opinions online.

How form shapes content

While accessibility is the gateway to social media adoption, the form or medium the content takes is also equally important. Participants shared how video, as a format, was interactive-therefore, more appealing to youths who want to be engaged and connect with the content. In this regard, participants shared how they consumed content on TikTok, some through live sessions and others through 'explainer' videos. The latter is a content format commonly adopted by content creators to break down and explain (sometimes complex) issues in accessible language. Although, as far as form goes, a participant shares their observation on the types of content and how it affects users:

> *"Sentimen lebih senang viral berbanding dengan [video] penjelasan. Penjelasan untuk isu itu sukar difahami. Orang biasanya akan skip atau tak cari. Video penjelasan biasanya 10 minit panjang. Kalau [video] sentimen, pendek dan buat orang terkejut dan emosi. Kalau berkaitan emosi, biasanya senang tersebar… Puncanya? Budaya malas mengkaji."*

Some participants observed that content creators, usually termed 'influencers', receive more traction among youths. A participant supportive of Pakatan Harapan shares their observation on how Perikatan Nasional utilised influencers in the previous elections:

> *"Influencer yang popular semua guna logo PN. Content mereka semua ada 'fasa'... Dah terbukti PH lemah di social media. Mereka ada di X dan Facebook, ya. Tapi mereka tak ada di TikTok. It's about investing. PH tak invest untuk bayar influencer. Kita kena buat sama macam PN. Kita kena ada budget untuk membayar jentera."*

In our observation of online campaigning during the 2023 state elections, we similarly observed youth content creators encouraging their followers to vote for Perikatan Nasional. This was done through catchy content, such as trendy memes[36] or social content with political messaging. In the forthcoming section (see: **Engaging in democracy: How youths are involved in democratic processes and institutions**), we will further

[36] Memes are online content that are typically humorous, satirical or ironic in nature. They are often relatable, using visual or textual 'shared knowledge' and are intended to be shared widely with users that connect with it.

explore how some participants actively shaped and contributed to the online campaign strategies of their supported political parties. However, it also needs to be said that some participants shared that due to the 'explaining' nature of explainer content, some sections of youths become uninterested in the format and prefer other forms of content.

The role of content creators cannot be understated. Beyond youth influencers, some participants with more religious leanings shared how they formed an understanding of Islamic issues and their relationship to politics through local preachers on social media. For example, a participant shares how they follow Ustaz Azhar Idrus, a Terengganu-based preacher with a humorous delivery style, who is known to endorse PAS.[37] While Ustaz Azhar's lectures are conducted in mosques, his recorded sessions-usually on various religious subjects-are cut into short video clips that are widely distributed online. Some of his content covers his political opinions, often on the state of governance and how the Muslim community and Islam are affected by it. In this regard, even though preachers like Ustaz Azhar do not actively curate a narrative on social media, his message resonates with sections of youths-who will, out of their own initiative, create clips from his lectures and distribute them.



A Mural advertisment in Kuala Terengganu

[37] Buang, S. (2018). Azhar Idrus: PAS pilihan terbaik untuk umat Islam. Malaysiakini. Available from: https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/423264

Engaging with political parties on social media

Some participants believe that political parties or politicians should utilise social media platforms and their medium to their fullest potential. A participant says this succinctly:

> *"Media sosial adalah persepsi. Kalau nak menang, kena menang persepsi. Kena nampak hebat dan kena pandai tunjuk baik."*

There is an observation to be made here, where youths acknowledge that the information environment on social media is unhealthy and designed to elicit strong emotions, but it remains a necessary approach to draw engagement. Some participants suggested that political parties should utilise the platform to engage young people and educate them on political developments and policy issues. One participant, a PAS supporter, details how the Islamist party utilised social media effectively in the previous elections:

> *"PAS selari dengan perkembangan teknologi, dan beri pengaruh yang besar dalam politik. Dalam PRU15, mereka menguasai media sosial dan Tiktok… Ahli politik mesti ada media sosial supaya mereka boleh mempengaruhi pendirian politik… Ini pelaburan yang dibuat oleh parti [PAS] untuk tarik anak muda untuk faham. [Ahli politik PAS] ada akaun TikTok untuk terangkan ideologi, dan guna se-maksimum-mungkin untuk sampaikan maklumat. [Semasa pilihanraya], FYP (For You Page[38]) dikuasai oleh PN. Bila buat live di TikTok, ada sampai puluhan ribu [penonton]."*

When considering political communications strategy, some participants stated it is insufficient to only engage with youths online. Political parties must also use a multi-directional approach involving activities such as rallies to establish a physical sense of community, which will further bolster any online efforts. In assessing the difference between participants who supported PH and those who supported PN; the former appeared to be more critical of PH's lack of online strategy, versus PN supporters who were confident of Perikatan's investment in their campaigning and communications strategy online. This perception is arguably reflected in the many post-election analyses by academics and analysts that suggested PN's notable electoral gains among the youth constituency in the 15th General Elections.

[38] The 'For You' page is a TikTok feature where the platform's algorithms suggest content related to the users' viewing history—usually from accounts that the user does not follow. This allows the user to explore 'new' related content.

Concerns with misinformation

Despite being an enabler for political education and awareness, some participants shared their concerns with social media platforms as propagators of misinformation and disinformation, the former of which has to do with false information and the latter, misleading information.[39] Most respondents shared how they observed content on social media that was deliberately manipulated to create false narratives, and consequently, sow discord among the public. A participant shares an example they observed during the elections:

> *"[Semasa pilihanraya] ada kempen media sosial yang ekstrem, sampai fitnah… Penyebaran fitnah ini, kalau tak terkawal boleh menyebabkan perbalahan. Mereka yang tak follow perbahasan Parlimen, dan cari fakta akan mudah percaya; mereka tak ada usaha nak kaji betul ke tak [sesuatu cerita tersebut]."*

Participants argued that the government needed to set guidelines or establish regulations to manage disinformation and misinformation, while stressing that media and political literacy were necessary to prepare the youth for democratic participation-especially for online platforms. Currently, governing laws covering the dissemination of online misinformation and disinformation are under the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998 (CMA 1998). The Act is undergoing amendments and has been tabled for a Parliamentary reading.[40]

The necessity for political literacy

A significant point of agreement for most participants was improving political and media literacy among the youth. This was grounded in three factors. The first was how social media platforms did not have adequate safeguards against misinformation and disinformation. The medium of social media-which prioritises short, concise, and visually-rich content, also leaves much context out of the story, potentially leading to misunderstandings and narrative manipulation. This lack of safeguards in a medium that incentivises short-form visual content is something some participants saw as a concern for youths who lack the necessary media and political literacy to assess information online critically.

[39] American Psychological Association. (2025). Misinformation and disinformation. American Psychological Association. Available from: https://www.apa.org/topics/journalism-facts/misinformation-disinformation

[40] Yin, C.O.P., Lim, N. and Ping, J.C.Y. (2024). Amendments to the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998 Tabled for First Reading. Lexology. Available from: https://www.lexology.com/library/detail.aspx?g=0cf6c108-c083-42b4-9ff2-6c0f41b696de

The second factor is an assessment of the youths themselves. In our discussion with participants, we found a distinct 'generational' shift between two cohorts of youths: those under 21 years old, and those above 21. Participants in the older cohort were critical of those in the younger cohort, often expressing concern that younger youths were more easily swayed by political rhetoric and emotion. This situation results from a lack of political awareness and critical thinking. As one participant shares:

> *"Anak muda mudah terpengaruh mungkin kerana malas membaca. Ini merupakan demografi yang lebih gemar mendengar daripada kaji [kalau maklumat] sahih atau tidak."*

Older participants would attribute this to the immaturity of 'youth' and an education system that did not prepare the younger generation for political and democratic participation. Some participants assessed the lack of political awareness extending to youths, not knowing elected representatives' roles, and how democratic institutions function. However, some participants shared how the UNDI18 bill, which reduced the voting age to 18 years old, hastened the political maturity of young voters. While this younger cohort may not necessarily be equipped with political awareness, getting involved in the democratic process of voting and witnessing the election campaigning 'matured' younger voters to this new landscape.

In this regard, most participants called for policies for the Malaysian education system to robustly integrate political and democratic literacy into the education syllabus formally. The Malaysian public education system only offers this in the Pendidikan Sivik dan Kewarganegaraan in secondary public education, and the Pengajian Am subject in Form 6, the latter being a pre-university programme. Beyond political literacy, some participants also suggested that media literacy courses be introduced in schools so that youths will be equipped with critical thinking skills to discern the information they consume from various media sources. Across the board, the introduction of civic education and political literacy as part of the education syllabus was something most, if not all, participants agreed on.



Perikatan Nasional rally

Youths (don't) feel represented

Representation is an important part of a democratic system, and in this instance, some participants believed that those in politics did not represent their aspirations and views. Some shared how supposed youth parties like MUDA were ineffective due to the lack of a grassroots movement. On the other hand, due to their urban-centric focus, Pakatan parties had limited activity in the Northern and East Coast regions. Some participants shared that PAS was the only party that appeared to be connected to the grassroots, especially by championing religious issues. However, it lacked the policy and economic acumen to represent youths in socio-economic matters effectively.

More broadly, most participants shared how they did not feel genuinely represented in the democratic landscape and that any overtures by political parties were often superficial and tokenistic. In one focus-group session, participants shared their frustrations with how those in government or political parties only perceived youths to be interested solely in entertainment:

> *"MB Kedah tak kisah [pasal isu belia]. Dah hampir empat tahun dia tak datang ke sesi libat urus [bersama organisasi belia]. Dia hanya engage dengan organisasi lain yang fokus dengan hiburan atau hobi. Benda yang seronok, untuk meraih undi."*

Or how political parties or the government make appearances to be listening, but do not take the youth's inputs into account, as shared by a participant who is involved in stakeholder roles:

> *"Dia ibarat curah air di daun keladi; ambil input tapi tak buat apa. Pandangan anak muda tak didengari, dan akhirnya, anak muda kena tunggu arahan [dari pihak berkuasa/politik]."*

Despite this disposition, other hopeful participants expressed how specific channels for representation still existed to make youth aspirations and voices heard. Participants in student organisations or youth movements in their communities shared how they were actively involved in civil society activities, and continued to engage with political parties or the government. Short of joining a political party, civil society organisations were acknowledged as a means of representation, although their effectiveness was in question. The UNDI18 bill was also acknowledged as an enabler for youth voices to be more represented in democracy, although it was limited to voting.

Engaging in democracy: elections, community and politics

How youths are involved in democratic processes and institutions

Our conversations with participants found that youth participation in democratic processes varied widely depending on their political beliefs and current state, e.g., whether they were employed, studying or had time to dedicate to activism. Participants' levels of involvement can be categorised into the following tiers:

Tiers of Involvement	Actions
Not involved	Uninterested in being involved
(Somewhat) involved	Voted during elections Shares and discussess political developments online
Very involved	Joins or form groups that carry out community work, and/or discuss political issues Engages with government and political parties Participate in campus elections Involved with political parties during election campaigning Registered as a political party member

Participants who were uninterested in being involved in democratic processes and politics often shared how they were uninterested in politics due to the perception of it being "*terlalu serabut*", or messy. Other participants expressed disgust at the obsessive nature of political party supporters and did not want to be associated with it. However, most participants described how the perceived heavy commitment deters them from being involved and having other priorities to attend to, such as studying or working.

Despite the non-involvement, all participants indicated they voted in the 15th General Elections, seeing it as the most basic democratic responsibility. Voter turnout for UNDI18 voters, i.e. first-time young voters, was at 79% in GE15, on par with voters 50 years and older.[41] Some participants took this as an indication that the youth vote was decisive and important, prompting discussions on political parties needing to take the youth constituency more seriously. This level of engagement also involved participants typically keeping up with current affairs and political developments, although the commitment varied depending on the individual.

[41] Welsh, B. (2023). GE15 generational voting: Looking beyond ethnicity. Bridget Welsh. Available from: https://bridgetwelsh.com/articles/ge15-generational-voting-looking-beyond-ethnicity-part-2/

Finally, when it comes to highly-engaged participants, these individuals would share their experience being involved in student or advocacy groups or active youth members in their chosen political parties. Even participants who were not formal members got involved with helping political candidates during the federal and state elections in 2022 and 2023, respectively. The forms of involvement differ between participants, but those who were supportive or linked to PAS appeared to be the most active and involved due to ideological commitment, compared to other participants who were either unaligned or supportive of Pakatan. One participant, who was a campaign volunteer during the state elections, shares:

> *"Media sosial mampu mempengaruhi pemikiran anak muda. Terutamanya kalau satu parti buat lambakan content di media sosial… Kita ride dengan [content yang] trending dengan menyampaikan mesej politik. Jadi tak pelik PN menang sebab strategi buat lambakan content ini… Kita sebagai anak muda PN ada tanggungjawab untuk membantu. Dan ya, tak ada bayaran [yang diberikan oleh parti]. Semua mahasiswa yang laksanakan. Jadi pandai-pandai sendiri semua."*

Outside campaigning season, these highly-engaged individuals would use social media and messaging platforms like Telegram to conduct *dakwah*, or spread political awareness. This would take many forms, from writing analytical essays on Facebook to designing posters for social media on specific socio-cultural issues. These highly-engaged and motivated individuals often do this on their own initiative, believing it to be their democratic and political responsibility. Some participants were also active in campus elections, running as candidates or being part of campaigning. Campus elections have traditionally been among the platforms for youths to be involved in and exposed to democratic processes.[42]


Perlis

[42] Sani, R. and Mustafa, Z. (2019). UM students become trailblazers of democracy. NST Online. Available from: https://www.nst.com.my/education/2019/03/468715/um-students-become-trailblazers-democracy

Capacity building programmes

As an extension of youth involvement in democratic and political processes, some participants shared their experience participating in capacity-building programmes or participating in a youth organisation or movement. Most participants shared how they first got involved in university through student or religious groups. Religious groups, in particular, were the starting point for several participants, who first began by attending *usrah* groups, where they discussed religious matters and political developments. Their involvement in usrah groups, whether organised by PAS or other Islamist organisations, would eventually lead them to become more active in different aspects of the organisation, whether facilitating programmes or undergoing leadership training.

Some of the PAS-involved participants we spoke to shared how they were already active as early as secondary school, where children of PAS members were typically part of the party's *Unit Amal*, a youth-led welfare arm that does community and charity work. PAS Youth has been proactive on capacity building and cadreship for decades, creating a sustainable line of leadership from a pool of members, or what in Bahasa Malaysia is called pelapis, which translates to 'political successors'. A 2011 paper by Liow comprehensively describes how the Islamist party cultivates its youth members through leadership training, autonomy in programme management and *dakwah*.[43] A participant shares:

> *"Kita ada taskforce untuk menarik sokongan anak muda—18 tahun, untuk memberi kesedaran politik. Kita boleh lihat yang kesedaran anak muda semakin bertambah. Contoh di Terengganu… program tak putus. E-sports; kita anjurkan Mobile Legends dan PUBG. Ataupun gathering [motor] RXZ. Pembinaan kader PAS di peringkat kampung tak pernah putus. Kita ada Jabatan Pembangunan Remaja untuk belia bawah umur 15 tahun yang boleh join program Unit Amal."*

Other than PAS-involved participants, other youths we spoke to also participated in capacity-building or leadership programmes. A participant shared how leading up to the federal and state elections, they closely followed the activist Fahmi Reza's online live sessions on democratic and political awareness classes called "Kelas Demokrasi", where he educates viewers, mostly youths, on how the Malaysian political and democratic institutions work[44]. However, the "Kelas Demokrasi" programme was barred from being

[43] Liow, J.C. (2011). Creating Cadres: Mobilization, Activism and the Youth Wing of the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party, PAS. Pacific Affairs, 84(4), pp.665–686.

[44] Reza, F. (2024). Rakyat Adalah Boss - Kelas Demokrasi. Kelas Demokrasi. Available from: https://kelasdemokrasi.com/

held in several public universities, with the institution administrations claiming that the activist-artist required permission to have the sessions, despite (friendly) political actors being allowed to enter universities freely[45]. Following this, several "Kelas Demokrasi" sessions were organised outside university grounds, with high attendance from students interested in learning about the country's democratic and institutional structures.

Other participants, some of whom are Pakatan-involved, shared how they attended the Democratic Action Party's (DAP) "Sekolah Demokrasi" programme, which was functionally similar to capacity-building programmes focused on leadership skills and democratic awareness. However, apart from PAS and DAP, other parties did not appear to have a structured capacity-building infrastructure for interested youths. Therefore, the opportunities available in the university environment would allow the broader youth constituency to be familiar with the democratic institution, even on a smaller scale.



Nurul Izzah adressing the media during a rally in Kuala Lumpur

[45] The Malaysian Insight. (2022). Berhenti 'kacau' pelajar Kelas Demokrasi, kata kumpulan peguam. The Malaysian Insight. Available from: https://www.themalaysianinsight.com/bahasa/s/416010

Weaknesses in the current youth engagement landscape

Despite these developments in capacity building and engagement programmes offered by the government, political parties, or civil society, participants discussed the weaknesses in how these programmes were carried out. Among the main criticisms was the question of equity. Capacity-building and youth leadership programmes were seen to primarily target 'selected' individuals instead of broadly capturing the larger youth demographic and offering equal opportunities for growth. Inequity in these programmes was also most evident when it came to how youths in different regions could access these programmes. One participant from the East Coast region shares:

> *"Ada perbezaan antara Pantai Barat dan Pantai Timur. Anak muda di Pantai Barat diberi banyak peluang, dan anak muda di Pantai Timur tak diberi peluang."*

As discussed earlier in the report (see: **What Malay youths are worried about: An uncertain economic future**), regional, urban-rural inequality was not only an economic issue, but also a socio-political one. In this regard, it is unsurprising that PAS, with its broad grassroots reach and youth-driven Unit Amal, can gain a foothold among youth communities across the East Coast and parts of the Northern region. The Islamist party offers a pathway for youths to be involved in their communities and the democratic process, where other parties or the government could not. The late social scientist Abdul Rahman Embong made similar observations on the democratic participation of the Malay middle-class, which was more active and mobilised in the metropolitan Klang Valley compared to the East Coast cities.[46]

When it comes to resources, participants active in youth organisations and community movements share how they had difficulties mobilising due to a lack of structured funding from the government, which in turn, made it challenging for them to run effective programmes and draw in new members—the latter, an important aspect of building organisations sustainability via cadres. A participant experienced with engaging the government shares:



Burger stalls usually run by Malay Youth

[46] Embong, A.R. (2002). Malay Middle-Class Politics, Democracy and Civil Society. In State-led Modernization and the New Middle Class in Malaysia. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, pp. 149–167.

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> *"Tak ada cukup dana untuk program [dari kerajaan]. Dekat tahap lokal, kadang-kadang kita boleh kerjasama dengan ADUN. Tapi kalau kita lihat ke KBS (Kementerian Belia dan Sukan), ada orang tengah dan biasanya dana tak akan sampai. Jadi, kalau tak ada dana, macam mana nak buat program? Takde program, akhirnya tak ada pelapis. Kita ada lebih seribu organisasi belia yang berdaftar, tapi yang aktif kurang dari lima belas. Kita yang mewakili akar umbi tapi tak dilayan."*

Another similarly active participant believes that funding is available and that the government or agencies do not have transparent processes to enable youth agency in their communities.

> *"Dana dah ada, tapi agensi [kerajaan] tak transparent dengan kami. Bagaimana kita nak hentikan masalah non-transparency ni? Kita nak buat program tapi asyik diberitahui yang 'tak ada dana'... Kita nak buka akaun [bank] [untuk kumpul dana sendiri] tapi tak diluluskan."*

In this regard, some youths shared how agency officers they have dealt with do not seem to care to either cultivate relationships or genuinely engage with them, which becomes a frustrating experience as these agency officers are supposed to bridge the governing bureaucracy and youth voices.



Partaking a Punk rock show

Section 5: Belonging and Multiculturalism

"Bagaimana nak bina empathy kalau Melayu tak connect dengan bukan-Melayu? Kita dipisahkan oleh sistem pendidikan. Kita kena ada sistem satu sekolah untuk semua, supaya adanya ruang untuk kaum yang berbeza untuk mingle. Kenapa tak ada usaha untuk menyatukan?... Ya, sekolah kebangsaan ada kekurangan, tapi kita masih boleh cemerlang di sekolah kebangsaan."

Polarisation among Malaysians

Among the main topics of discussion with participants is the question of polarisation. In the previous sections, we have discussed how participants have identified certain political actors as active agitators, purposely using 3R, i.e. Race, Religion, and Royalty topics, to sow anxiety and divide among Malaysians. The previous sections also examined how social media platforms were weaponised to spread misinformation and disinformation among youths, who lacked the necessary media or political literacy to discern hateful and inciting content. These two main factors were identified as contributing factors to polarisation among youths and Malaysians. In addition, some participants stated that politics in its current form was used to manipulate and divide communities. A participant shares how politics is weaponised:

"Kita ni sebenarnya masyarakat majmuk. Kalau selain dari politik, kita okay. Kita boleh berbincang walaupun berbeza [pendapat]. Kita fikirkan konsep muamalat[47] atau kerjasama. Kalau libatkan politik pula, masing-masing akan berpihak ke parti masing-masing dan ini akan memberikan kesan negatif."

[47] Muamalat is translated from Arabic to mean 'engagement' or 'transactions', often referring to relationships between different groups over a variety of areas such as politics, society or economics.

Other participants accused politicians and political parties of extending colonial mentality, relying on divide and conquer approaches to further polarisation. In these discussions, politics is primarily framed as a negative force one uses to: 1) sow divisions between Malaysians, and 2) further political agendas for their gains. This distrust towards the political landscape and its institutions is what is seen to push youths towards apathy further.

Additionally, participants attributed feelings of threat (initially inflamed by political discourse) as a driver for polarisation. Some participants believed that some perceptions of threat are manufactured, using the Buy Muslim First (BMF) campaign and the boycotts of non-Malay businesses and products as an example. In contrast, some perceptions of threat come from genuine feelings of concern towards their political or socio-economic livelihood. The latter results from ineffective policy-making and is inflamed by political rhetoric. This ties to an observation we made during the fieldwork of this study, where across the different regions, we found that the levels of urban development in localities shape the political perceptions of communities in those constituencies.[48]

How developmental policies (or lack of them) contribute to dissatisfaction

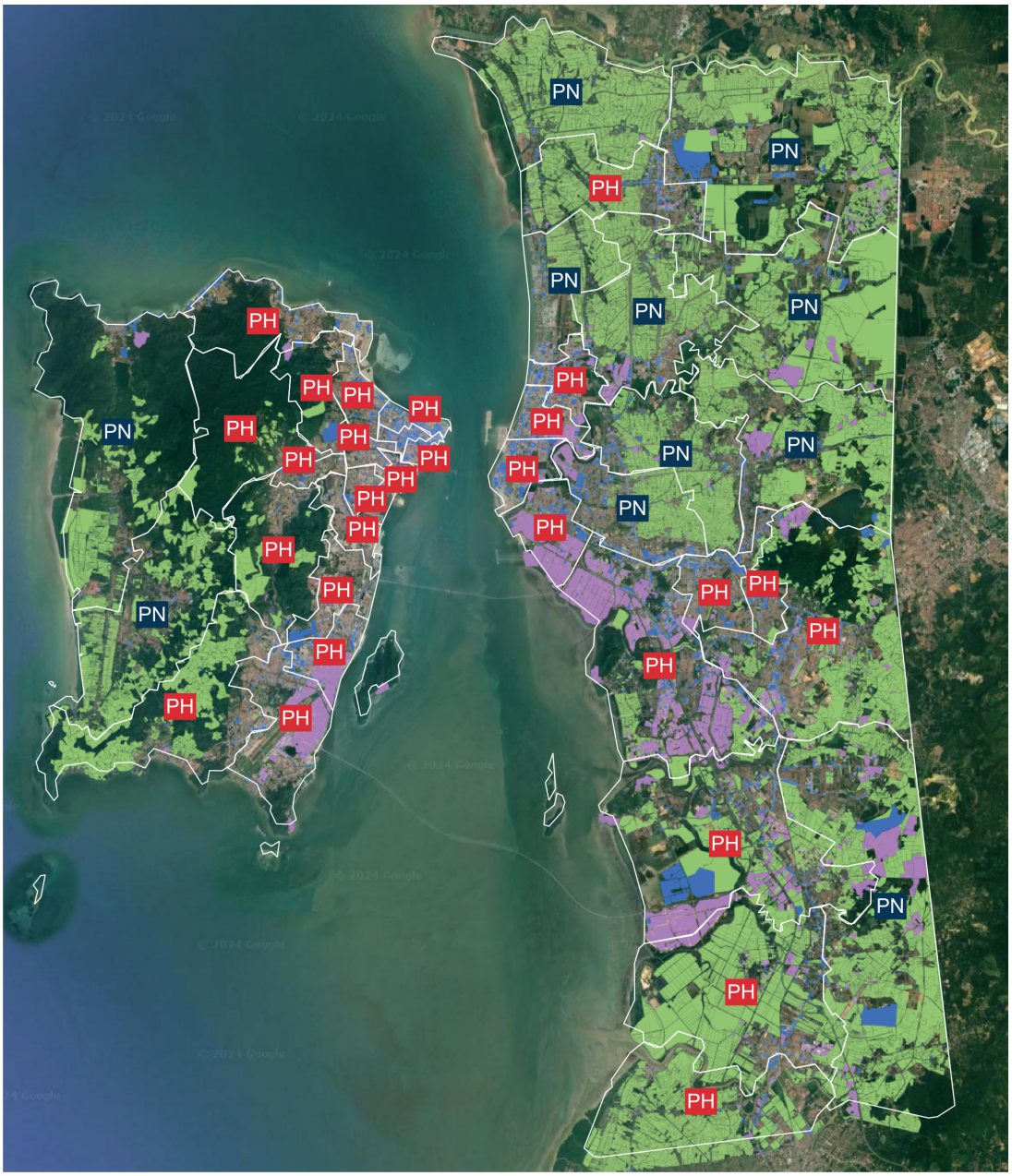
For example, in Pulau Pinang, youth participants from the mainland believed that the DAP-led state government took discriminatory approaches to urban and socio-economic development—preferring to invest and upscale localities closer to the island, which incidentally has a higher concentration of non-Malay population compared to the localities closer towards the Kedah border that is Malay-majority. In this regard, policies by the government that materialise (or don't) on the local level fuel the political perception and feelings of 'threat' experienced by youths in less developed localities.



Penang Tourist

[48] Azuddin, A. (2024). Northern ambitions. The Star. Available from: https://www.thestar.com.my/news/focus/2024/10/20/northern-ambitions

Pulau Pinang PRN 2023 Results Against Land-Use



Created by Aziff Azuddin | Source SPR, PlanMalaysia

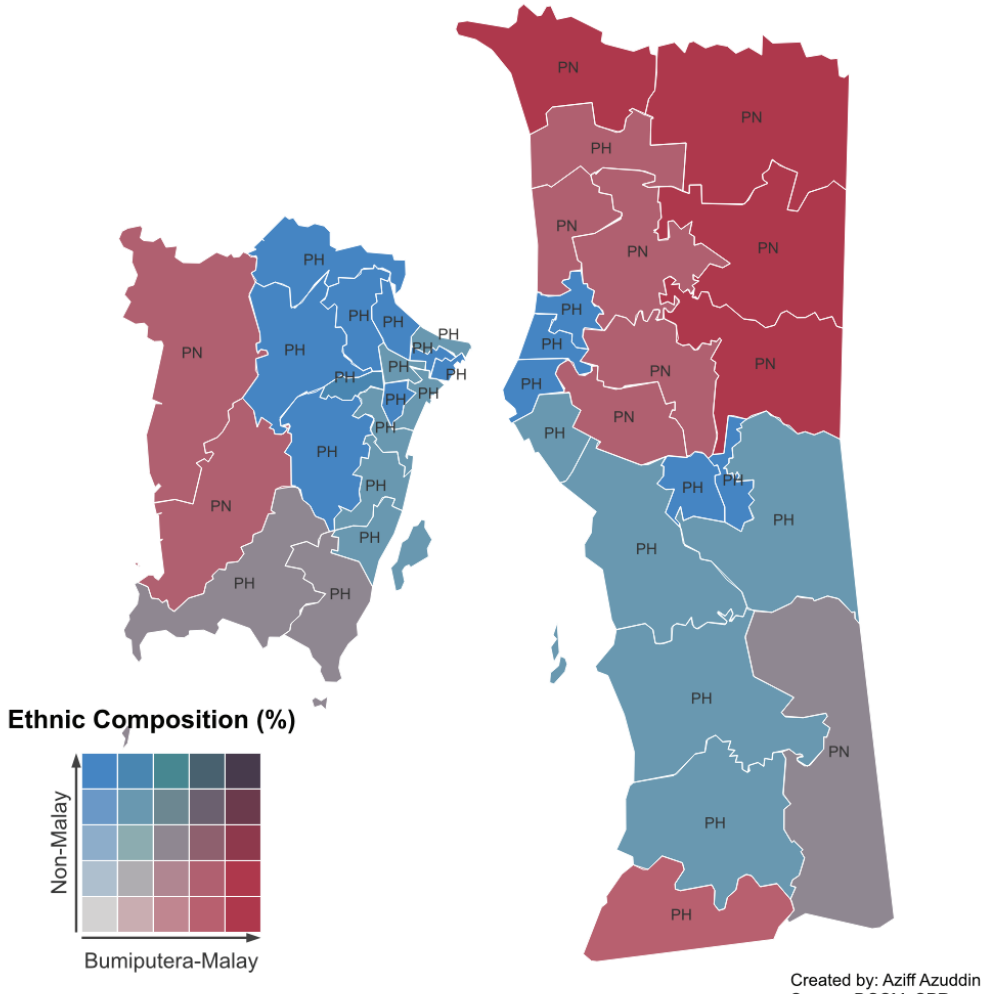
The electoral map above compares land use against constituency-level areas and shows which parties won in those areas. A few observations can be made from this data visualisation:

1. Areas that had higher industrial and commercial activities (represented in purple and blue, respectively) tend to be won by Pakatan Harapan.
2. Areas with higher agriculture-related activities (represented in green) tend to be won by Perikatan Nasional.

A secondary map on ethnic composition in a locality, as shown below, further contextualises the 2023 Pulau Pinang state electoral results. Areas with higher Bumiputera-Malay populations tend to be won by Perikatan. These were also incidentally areas that were less 'developed', with a higher focus on agricultural activity than regions with a higher non-Malay composition that incidentally had more economic and commercial activity. While this phenomenon suggests that a higher Malay population helps predict Perikatan's win in a constituency, this is not unique to Pulau Pinang. The resentment that follows perceptions of development inequality is mapped on how participants perceive fair and equitable governance, particularly on a federal level, where the Pakatan-Barisan government is accused of discriminating against the Northern and East Coast states. Pulau Pinang also becomes an example due to the state being led by the Democratic Action Party (DAP), a significant component of the federal government, which is perceived as a non-Malay party.

Pulau Pinang PRN 2023 Results Against Ethnic Composition

DUNs with higher ethnic compositions of specific race groups tend to vote according to political-racial affiliations



In this regard, policies that affect the everyday lived experience of Malaysians cannot be separated from how they perceive and eventually form political beliefs of threats, mainly when their everyday lived environment further confirms this perception. This ties into the earlier discussion on the observed inequality between regions affecting economic and socio-political life.

When ineffective local policymaking is combined with pre-existing anxieties about other ethnic groups, it becomes easier for bad-faith political actors to take advantage of this intersection to further polarise Malaysians based on their dissatisfaction. Some participants then point to a lack of interaction and overall exposure between Malay and non-Malay groups as furthering this divide. The lack of engagement makes it easier for different groups to form stereotypes and negative impressions of one another based on political messaging and negative content on social media. A participant sceptical of Malaysia's multicultural image sees it as superficial:

> *"Masyarakat Melayu dan bukan-Melayu okay tapi hanya pada surface. Sebenarnya, tak ada real bonding sebab kita tak bercampur. Muhibbah tak ditekankan dan tak ada orang yang nak initiate kerana orang rasa tak penting."*

However, despite this disposition, participants also shared positive experiences engaging with non-Malay friends and how that shaped a more positive, inclusive image of Malaysia for them. This will be explored further in the following section.



A Local Chinese kopitiam with Malay Nasi Padang vendor at Transfer Road, Penang

Shades of multiculturalism, and "kita jaga kita"

Most participants agreed that multiculturalism was something to be celebrated as a part of what it meant to be Malaysian. Diversity was seen as a positive asset, and many stated that the perceived harmonious relationship (outside political polarisation) between the different ethnic groups was something to be grateful for. Many participants shared experiences of their relationships with non-Malay friends or colleagues, detailing their respect and understanding for each other. One common theme was that most participants' first genuine engagement with non-Malays was at university, as one participant shared:

> *"Saya tak terdedah dengan kaum atau agama lain bila di sekolah menengah. Jadi bila masuk universiti, saya belajar tentang budaya dan agama lain; bagaimana nak bergaul, makanan mereka, pemakaian tradisional, macam mana nak jaga sensitiviti. Saya tak terdedah dengan semua ini bila kat sekolah… Nak berkawan dengan kawan dari agama dan kaum lain ambil masa."*

Similar to the participant above, several participants shared how growing up, they had limited interaction or understanding of other ethnic groups before entering university. Much of this has to do with the low population of non-Malays in the Northern and East Coast regions, with the majority of the population being Malay, and the non-Malays usually living in urbanised parts of the states. The university space appears to be a safe and conducive environment for Malays with limited exposure to genuinely engage with non-Malays and learn more about each other. This phenomenon is termed 'contact hypothesis', where intergroup exposure in the right environment can reduce prejudice and improve intergroup relationships.[49]

Some participants shared their experiences living in multicultural communities, whether in their villages or towns, and stated how communal harmony was a norm. One participant used the phrase "kita jaga kita", popularised during the COVID-19 pandemic during times of dire need when Malaysian communities helped each other, when the government was perceived to have failed in providing the necessary services or aid.[50] In this part of the discussion, participants happily shared positive anecdotes of relationships between Malays and non-Malays, where respect, empathy and understanding were the core themes.

[49] Wessel, T. (2009). Does Diversity in Urban Space Enhance Intergroup Contact and Tolerance? Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography, 91(1), pp.5–17.

[50] Lee, C. (2023). #KitaJagaKita: (De)legitimising the Government During the 2020 Movement Control Order. In K. Rajandran & C. Lee, eds. Discursive Approaches to Politics in Malaysia: Legitimising Governance. Singapore: Springer Nature, pp. 229–249.

However, some of these relationships' goodwill was also conditioned on boundaries. These boundaries were often sensitivities that either party recognised as red lines or contentious subjects, such as politics or religion. Another aspect of the relationship was the openness and accommodation of participants' non-Malay friends towards Islam. Some participants shared experiences of their non-Malay friends who "took care of their *akidah*[51]", such as reminding them of their prayers. These overtures were considered ideal for a stable relationship between Malay-Muslims and non-Malays.

Roadblocks to multiculturalism and overcoming them

While the sharing of positive intergroup relationships was robust, some participants also discussed factors limiting the harmonious relationship between Malays and non-Malays, excluding politics. A major recurring argument was the role of vernacular schools in dividing Malaysian society from a young age. One participant shares how a single school system can resolve the non-engagement problem between the different ethnic groups:

> *"Bagaimana nak bina empathy kalau Melayu tak connect dengan bukan-Melayu? Kita dipisahkan oleh sistem pendidikan. Kita kena ada sistem satu sekolah untuk semua, supaya adanya ruang untuk kaum yang berbeza untuk mingle. Kenapa tak ada usaha untuk menyatukan?... Ya, sekolah kebangsaan ada kekurangan, tapi kita masih boleh cemerlang di sekolah kebangsaan."*

In this regard, some participants believed that vernacular schools, with their separate education system, should be abolished. Vernacular schools were also seen as sidelining the national language, Bahasa Malaysia. Some participants criticised certain sections of non-Malays for being reluctant to adopt the national language fluently despite being Malaysians. Beyond critiquing non-Malay communities, which will be explored in greater depth in the upcoming section, participants also identified existing government policy as a roadblock to multiculturalism. For example, socio-economic inequality between the different ethnic groups and the Bumiputera economic policies underpinning it were cited as among the main reasons for intergroup conflict. Discussions surrounding policies supporting Bumiputera privilege often acknowledge that the elite class has abused the policies, and does not benefit or 'trickle down' to the average Malaysian, Bumiputera or otherwise. In this instance, there is a call for inclusive policies, especially for education and the economy-two key areas that have tangible effects on social mobility.

[51] Akidah refers to the core beliefs or creed of Islam, which forms the foundations of the religious moral and theological framework.

When it comes to overcoming the roadblock to a harmonious, multicultural society, one participant shares that the responsibility lies with individuals and communities:

> *"Kepelbagaian itu agenda yang kolektif. Kita tak boleh harapkan kerajaan. Setiap orang memainkan peranan untuk membina persepsi positif terhadap satu sama lain. Kerja orang rasis memang untuk mengapi-apikan kebencian. Dalam PRU sebelumnya, isu perkauman dimainkan untuk meraih undi. Susah kita nak capai perpaduan… Kita kena usaha untuk mencari persamaan dan bergerak serentak."*

Other participants cited the Madinah Charter as a reference for building a multicultural society. The Madinah Charter is a 7th century constitution developed in the early years of Islam, outlining a governance framework and social contract between the different communities in the city of Madinah.[52] Participants who discussed the Madinah Charter highlighted aspects of the document that emphasise pluralistic values, inclusivity and equal justice-some arguing that in the contemporary context, political governance can be managed justly by Malay-Muslim leadership, with an emphasis on the protection of non-Malay-Muslim rights and freedoms.

Ultimately, however, there is a consensus among participants that Malaysia requires a unifying ideology and goal to overcome intergroup distrust and improve upon the multicultural model. For some, this tradeoff is reasonable even if this comes at the expense of minority rights to vernacular education or seceding governance to Malay-Muslim leadership.



Barisan Nasional office Perlis

[52] Salma, Z., Hidayat, R. and Harahap, S.M. (2024). The Medina Charter and Lessons of Multiculturalism in Contemporary Islamic Politics. NEGREI: Academic Journal of Law and Governance, 4(2), pp.111–138.

The non-Malay dilemma: Perceptions of Non-Malay, i.e. Chinese chauvinism

When discussing multiculturalism and its roadblocks, it is also crucial to address perceptions, whether rightly or wrongly. While not all participants discussed their negative perceptions of non-Malay communities, some did to varying degrees. These perceptions are formed through (social) media consumption, personal experience, observations, or anecdotes from social circles. In these discussions, the Malaysian-Chinese community is often the subject of these negative perceptions—specifically, Malaysian-Chinese of the West Coast.

The Malaysian-Chinese are often depicted as exclusivist; reluctant to speak the national language, not engaging with the Malay community while simultaneously looking down on them, and "interfering", or weighing critically on what participants see as Malay-Muslim affairs. There are also perceptions among a small number of participants on Chinese domination of the national and local economy. One participant residing in a suburban/ rural part of the Northern state shares:

> *"Kita jual tanah ke [kapitalis] Cina, dan Cina ambil. Kebanyakan tanah [di sini] dah diambil oleh mereka. Kita lihat Pulau Pinang sebagai contoh, seolah-olah kita tinggal di tanah Cina dan kena ikut kata mereka."*

This belief and perception are also mirrored in ongoing political discourse where political actors and media propagate narratives on how the Chinese capitalist class is incrementally taking over land-ownership in Malaysia, as a result of it being sold by the Malays themselves.[53] This has extended to anxieties and fears that the Malays will eventually be 'squatters' in their land.[54]

However, despite this negative disposition towards the (West Coast) Chinese community, some participants shared positive perceptions of East Coast Chinese who were seen to be respectful and understanding of Malay-Muslim sensitivities. They have made efforts to assimilate into the broader culture while retaining their cultural and religious identities. However, it is worth examining if the cultural beliefs and politics of the East Coast Chinese—a community often cited by Malay nationalists as the 'model Chinese'—

[53] The Merdeka Times. (2022). Separuh daripada Semenanjung Malaysia dimiliki orang Cina, gara-gara bangsa Melayu asyik jual tanah – Dr. Mahathir. The Merdeka Times. Available from: https://themerdekatimes.com/news/2022/09/separuh-daripada-semenanjung-malaysia-dimiliki-orang-cina-gara-gara-bangsa-melayu-asyik-jual-tanah-dr-mahathir; Rosli, F.A. (2022). Tanah rizab Melayu didakwa hanya tinggal kira-kira 12 peratus. Berita Harian. Available from: https://www.bharian.com.my/berita/nasional/2022/06/967847/tanah-rizab-melayu-didakwa-hanya-tinggal-kira-kira-12-peratus

[54] Awang, K. (2025). MPM enggan PSB jadikan Melayu merempat di tanah sendiri. TV Pertiwi. Available from: https://tvpertiwi.com/2025/04/04/mpm-enggan-psb-jadikan-melayu-merempat-di-tanah-sendiri/

are considered an exception or norm compared to the broader Malaysian-Chinese community across the country. When some participants discuss the assimilation model, the East Coast Chinese community is often the reference point.

However, it is worth considering that the East Coast Chinese community are a minority group comprising less than 2.5% of either the Terengganu or Kelantan population. This also means that the assimilation is also driven by the necessity to survive within the broader Malay-majority society.[55] This echoes the earlier analyses on Malay and non-Malay relationships predicated on the accommodation of Malay needs, such as preserving political red lines or tolerance for Malay-Muslim religious and cultural practices. Due to their small population, East Coast Chinese communities also reside within state-sanctioned enclaves where they can freely practice their culture and religion (which may go against Malay-Muslim values), unlike West Coast Chinese communities, where, due to their larger population, inhabit the public space with their cultural and political existence. Consequently, Malay-Muslim communities outside the Northern and East Coast states are forced to confront and negotiate with the Chinese communities in these public spaces, leading to potential socio-political and cultural conflict.



Fishing village in Perlis

[55] Sathian, M.R. and Ngeow, Y.M. (2014). Essentialising Ethnic and State Identities: Strategic Adaptations of Ethnic Chinese in Kelantan, Malaysia. Asian Studies Review, 38(3), pp.385–402.

Section 6: What do Malay youths want?

"Pemimpin tak boleh terima rasuah, malah memberinya. Kalau kita dapat betul-betul hapuskan [rasuah], saya yakin negara akan aman. Tapi sekarang, kita boleh nampak akan naik orang yang tak sepatutnya; wujudnya kroni. Budaya rasuah ini yang rosakkan kerajaan."

Mature political culture and leadership

Participants unanimously agreed that they desired to see maturity from the political class. As discussed in the earlier section, youths developed apathy and disinterest towards politics due to what they see as endless fighting among both government and opposition policymakers. As shared by participants, the desire for political maturity comes from the anxiety caused by the opposition coalition, Perikatan Nasional's *Langkah* or year-long machinations to unseat the federal government—acts which participants shared were detrimental to the overall stability necessary to make Malaysia conducive for foreign investors.

Specifically for Perikatan Nasional, participants expected the opposition to take its role seriously and adopt the role of checks and balances, debating policy instead of drawing on race and religious issues to remain politically relevant. All participants agreed that the government and the opposition must set aside their differences and focus on nation-building.

The quotation by the participant above, however, does not acknowledge that the opposition movement in Indonesia is weak, in the face of a supermajority government—allowing the Indonesian government to govern with limited resistance, even if at the expense of the Indonesian public and democratic principles.[56] This, however, speaks to the Malay youths' broader desire for a Malay polity, which will be discussed further in this section.

[56] Kalla, N. (2024). The Weakening of Political Opposition in Indonesia. Modern Diplomacy. Available from: https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2024/07/05/the-weakening-of-political-opposition-in-indonesia/

Importance of Islam-Malay in public and political life

Elevation and strengthening of Islamic principles in legal and policy frameworks

Many, if not all, participants expected Islam to be part of public life. However, there was a broad spectrum regarding how deeply or integrated Islam would be in legal and policy frameworks. Some participants believed that political Islam should be adopted as a governance structure:

> *"Kita mesti wujudkan daulah Islam yang memerintah sepenuhnya."*

This section of participants also believed that the Shariah legal system must be strengthened and given broader powers, given the current polemics surrounding the perceived limited reach of Shariah legal institutions. However, other sections of participants desired less obvious integrations, but one that is still driven primarily by Islamic principles:

> *"Tak perlu guna nama nama perundangan Islam atau istilah Arab. Kita boleh laksanakan syariah tanpa nama syariah."*

Some participants diagnosed that the current disappointing state of leadership is due to political leadership not following the "true" teachings of Islam. There is an unwavering belief that if Islamic principles or Shariah legal and political structures were adequately implemented in the Malaysian fabric, it would significantly improve society en masse.



Perikatan Nasional political sermon during Selangor 15th State Elections

Malay polity and political unity

Some participants believed that a Malay polity and political unity—were necessary for the long-term stability of Malaysia. The former draws on the political memory of participants who remember a pre-14th General Elections political landscape where UMNO was the linchpin Malay party that maintained stability among ethnic-religious groups while maintaining Malay political power. The decades-long stability was maintained based on an understanding that UMNO and the Malays were 'first among equals' within the Barisan Nasional coalition and multicultural society at large.[57] While the latter point on political unity refers to the breaking of Malay political power post-2018, reflected in the splintering of the Malay vote across a variety of Malay-Muslim parties ranging from Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (Bersatu), The Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), Umno and Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR), represents this anxiety.[58] This split is perceived to weaken the political legitimacy of Malayness and Islam in Malaysia's sociopolitical fabric. This leads to the belief that it becomes easier for non-Malay bad-faith actors to take advantage of this predicament. Therefore, a united Malay coalition or front would rebuild and reinforce Malay political strength.



PH-BN Selangor 15th State Elections nomination announcement rally

[57] Saat, N. and Alatas, S.A. (2024). Mahathir's Broadside About Race: Time to Map Out a Coherent Vision. FULCRUM. Available from: https://fulcrum.sg/mahathirs-broadside-about-race-time-to-map-out-a-coherent-vision/

[58] Azuddin, A. (2024). The myth of Malay ideological unity. Malaysiakini. Available from: https://www.malaysiakini.com/columns/701868

National ambition and good governance

Among the main expectations of participants is for the government to reject corruption and cronyism. Youths believed that these ailments, which are perceived to be politically institutional, have largely affected the ability of the government to deliver policies and initiatives effectively.

> *"Pemimpin tak boleh terima rasuah, malah memberinya. Kalau kita dapat betul-betul hapuskan [rasuah], saya yakin negara akan aman. Tapi sekarang, kita boleh nampak akan naik orang yang tak sepatutnya; wujudnya kroni. Budaya rasuah ini yang rosakkan kerajaan."*

Participants also wanted to see Malaysia become a significant regional, if not global, leader. Much of which participants believed could be achieved if the government focused on equitably developing infrastructure across the country while actively uplifting Malaysians' economies and livelihoods.

In this instance, all participants stated that they expected the government to focus on developing the country's economy while protecting the needs of Malaysians. This included addressing the rising cost of living and enlivening the job market through strategic economic policies and investments. Some youths praised former premier Najib Razak's 1Malaysia vision—one of its significant projects being the 2050 National Transformation, centred on youths as the major stakeholders in mapping out the country's 30-year roadmap.[59] As a roadmap, TN50 was dismantled after the change of government in 2018, and there has been no indication that this valuable blueprint has been considered in the government's vision-planning since.[60] So far, the current government's MADANI branding has failed to resonate with youths and the broader public because 'there is a lack of strong policies, developments, and clear roadmaps that illustrate what Madani is supposed to represent'.[61] National ambition, a vision, and concrete implementation to materialise it are essential to give youths a sense of Malaysia's direction and international position in the coming years.

[59] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Malaysia. (2017). Fact Sheet - Transformasi Nasional 2050 (TN50). High Commission of Malaysia, Bandar Seri Begawan. Available from: https://www.kln.gov.my/web/brn_bandar-seri-begawan/news-from-mission/-/blogs/fact-sheet-transformasi-nasional-2050-tn50

[60] Kumar, P. and Zainuddin, A. (2018). TN50 officially dismantled but some aspirations remain alive. The Malaysian Reserve. Available from: https://themalaysianreserve.com/2018/12/24/tn50-officially-dismantled-but-some-aspirations-remain-alive/

[61] Azuddin, A. (2024). Nostalgia knot. The Star. Available from: https://www.thestar.com.my/news/focus/2024/07/07/nostalgia--knot

Inter-ethnic relationships and multiculturalism



advertisment using Jawi in Terengganu

All participants desired inter-ethnic and religious harmony across the different communities in Malaysia, regardless of background. In discussions across various groups, participants spoke of the need for a collective identity, some citing 'Bangsa Malaysia', a concept introduced by Malaysia's second Prime Minister, Tun Abdul Razak, in 1967.[62] Over the decades, 'Bangsa Malaysia' has been cited as a national imagination of a collective Malaysian identity shared across different ethnic and religious groups. This concept was further built upon by the fourth Prime Minister, Tun Mahathir, who infused 'Bangsa Malaysia' with concepts of Malay nationalism and multiculturalism, with its most tangible aspect being the usage of the national language and a shared prosperity vision exemplified by 'Vision 2020'.[63]

A section of participants, however, claimed that vernacular schools, in their propagation of a separate education system alongside their predominant use of a vernacular language instead of Bahasa Malaysia, were a roadblock to building the idea of a united Malaysia. This section called for abolishing vernacular schools and promoting a unified national education system that all Malaysians would participate in, regardless of background.

> *"Bab perpaduan, kita kena kuatkan hubungan antara kaum. Kena mansuhkan sekolah vernakular, dan naikkan sekolah kebangsaan untuk semua rakyat Malaysia. Ini boleh bina semangat perpaduan. Kita boleh belajar sekali bahasa lain supaya rakyat Malaysia betul-betul multilingual. Ini boleh menggalakkan rakyat Malaysia untuk lebih bersatu."*

Conversely, it is worth noting that the perceived 'Islamisation' of national schools—where the social environment and syllabus are increasingly adopting Malay-Muslim standards at the expense of the non-Malay minority, have also decreased its attractiveness to non-Malay-Muslim parents.[64]

[62] Rahman, M.A.A. (2022). Kabinet Perpaduan perlu hidupkan konsep 'bangsa Malaysia'. Berita Harian. Available from: https://www.bharian.com.my/berita/nasional/2022/12/1034804/kabinet-perpaduan-perlu-hidupkan-konsep-bangsa-malaysia

[63] Ishak, M.M. (2006). Tun Dr. Mahathir and the notion of 'Bangsa Malaysia'. Journal of International Studies, pp.49–76.

[64] Malaysiakini. (2007). Islamisation of national schools - a parents view. Malaysiakini. Available from: https://www.malaysiakini.com/letters/61811

Education reform and increased political awareness

Similarly to how participants had concerns regarding the existing education system and how it did not address current economic demands and develop a united society, they wanted to see education reform. In more concrete terms, participants believed that two areas of reform requiring attention were 1) political or media literacy and 2) moral and character development.

> *"Belia kena lebih berilmu dan peka terhadap kerajaan dan pentadbiran supaya isu 3R tak menjadi polemik, seperti kejahilan atau stereotaip berkenaan kaum atau agama lain. Kena ada silibus specific macam Pengajian Am. Media literacy pun sekarang sangat rendah dikalangan anak muda. Mereka terdedah dengan teknologi tapi bukan budaya [sendiri dan orang lain]. Kita kena buat anak muda lebih tertarik ataupun peka [terhadap budaya lain], dan kurang bergantung terhadap naratif orang lain."*

As discussed earlier, participants believed youths were not sufficiently prepared leading into the 15th General Elections and 2023 state elections, relying heavily on social media influencers or political figures to form their political opinions. This deficiency is believed to have guided first-time youth voters in the federal and state elections to vote based on easily-manipulated sentiment instead of a rational, informed understanding of political decision-making. Participants believe that education reform involving political literacy-educating youths about the country's institutions, governance structures, and social histories and cultures of others would be crucial in developing cohesiveness in the socio-political landscape.



Punk rock show

Youth agency and democratic inclusion

Many participants desired more youth inclusion in democratic processes and leadership on both local and political stages. Participants cited national elections in Indonesia and Thailand, where youth presence and involvement in democratic and political processes were seen to be more integrated, especially with the Move Forward Party in Thailand, which is primarily youth-led and carries Thai youth aspirations.[65]

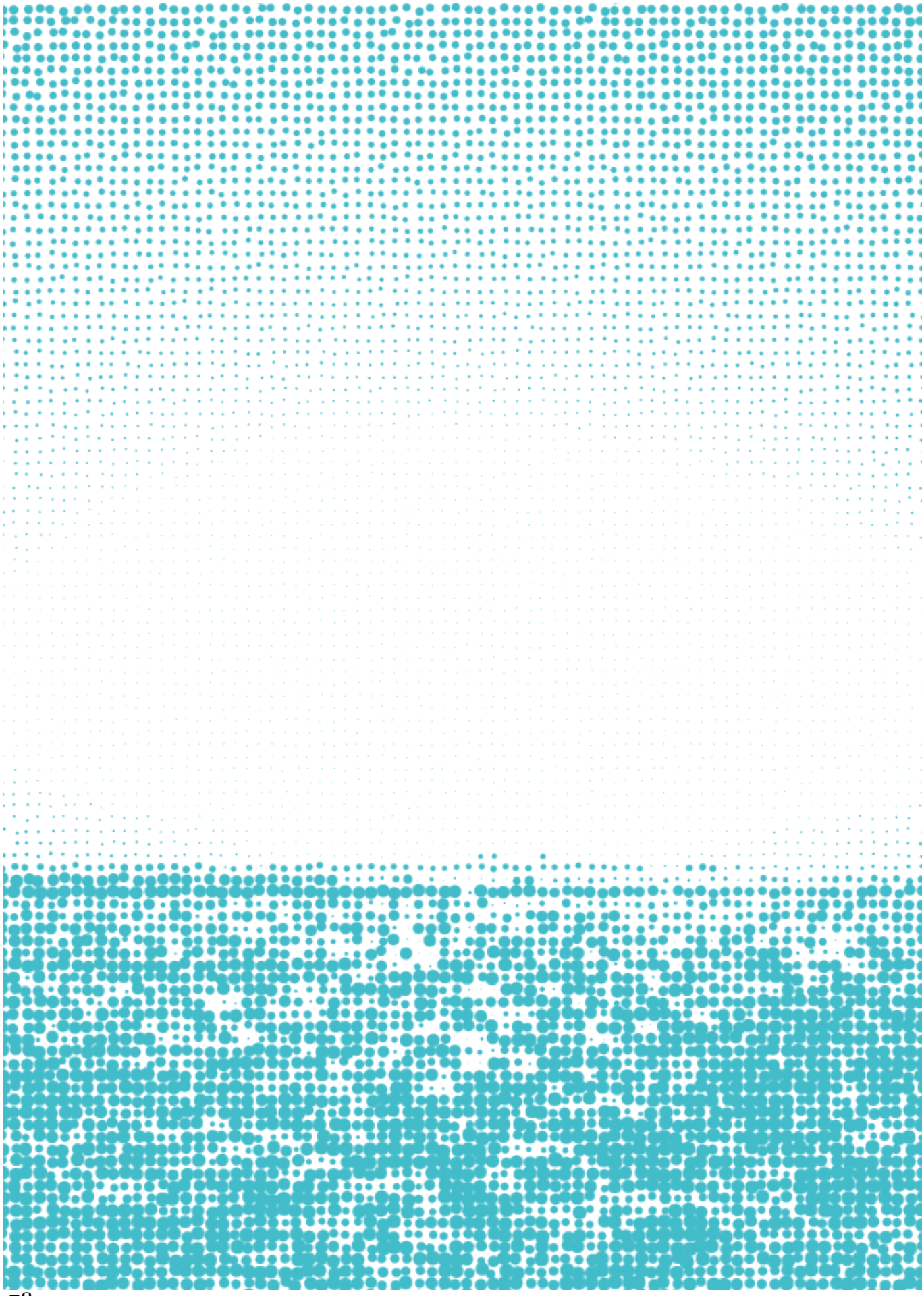
> *"Saya harap yang penglibatan belia dalam pentadbiran atau kepimpinan boleh diperkasakan. Kita tengok ke Thailand dan Indonesia—belia di sana diperkasakan dan mampu bebas dari politik dinosaur. Ia membabitkan golongan belia dan dinasihati oleh ahli politik senior."*

Participants hoped youths could move into (political) leadership and inject political culture with much-needed rejuvenation. Beyond political leadership, participants also hoped for more youths to be more involved in their communities. In discussions, this materialised in hopes that youths would join youth organisations such as Rakan Muda or Gerakan Belia 4B, both government-backed youth organisations that allow youths to contribute and give back to their communities. Some participants also proposed non-state-linked organisations, such as registered student organisations in universities. Ultimately, it is tied to the idea that youths should seek agency by getting involved in organisations that would allow them to be an active member of their communities.


Mosque as Community Centre

Youth agency and inclusion, in this regard, will allow them to play more significant roles in shaping the Malaysian socio-political landscape, whether in governance, political culture or inter-ethnic relationships. In the end, participants, as youths, recognised that they would eventually enter into roles of influence or leadership as the country's 'future assets' and hoped that their aspirations and voices would be reflected in both political and democratic institutions.

[65] King, B. (2024). Thai youth takes creative defiance into election. Nikkei Asia. Available from: https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Thai-election/Thai-youth-takes-creative-defiance-into-election2



Recommendations

For better or worse, the Malay question is central to Malaysian socio-political life. In GE15, 37% of youths under 30 voted for Perikatan, the highest in the age group.[66] The 'Green Wave' was attributed to this constituency, although for incorrect reasons. Early analysts and political narratives attempted to frame this phenomenon as an 'Islamist wave', or growing support for further Islamisation of Malaysia. We found through this in-depth study that this was not necessarily the case. While Islam was undoubtedly important to the identities of Malay youths, other pressing factors also influenced the political decision-making at the ballot box. Malay youths were responding to what they perceived were shortcomings in their everyday experience and what they were consuming online. Deep-rooted class resentment (stemming from challenging financial realities) and anxieties against perceived non-Malay economic dominance became fertile ground for sentiment manipulation by bad-faith political actors. The Islamic framework was also advocated through multiple fronts as a potential solution to socio-political and economic issues plaguing Malaysia, such as corruption, weak leadership and polarisation.


Detours Blocks

[66] Welsh, B. (2023). GE15 generational voting: Looking beyond ethnicity. Bridget Welsh. Available from: https://bridgetwelsh.com/articles/ge15-generational-voting-looking-beyond-ethnicity-part-2/

When Perikatan Nasional coined the tagline 'Bersih dan Stabil' compared to Pakatan Harapan's 'Kita Boleh', there is a resonance with the message of a 'clean and stable' political future—one that Malay youths desired after a tumultuous few years of the COVID-19 pandemic, political instability and economic uncertainty[67]. Leading into the next General Elections (estimated to be late 2027 or early 2028), political parties and the government should take heed to address the existing concerns of the youth across the different dimensions of democratic representation, governance and also material security but just as important, to carve out a vision for a shared Malaysian future, which begins by addressing how Malay youths view themselves, how they engage with others, and how they can move forward together.

Addressing agency

Agency was a key discussion point among the Malay youth participants, not only in the political and socio-cultural dimensions. Youths seek meaning in what they do; for some, this could mean forming meaningful communities or giving back to them. In this instance, we found that when governments limit opportunities for youths to organise themselves and their communities, they would move to the online space where bad-faith actors are likely to manipulate their political beliefs.

1. **Create physical spaces for organising, community-forming and expressing.**

   Physical spaces allow individuals to connect and form communities. This is important in grounding them in a sense of belonging, which becomes even more critical in localities outside major urban areas with fewer social and cultural opportunities. Community centres should not be gatekept, allowing youths to express themselves and connect with others through shared interests, whether through music, arts or sports. This also extends to university campuses, where administrators should not restrict student activities. These spaces, also known as 'social infrastructure', are essential in establishing democratic belonging through a physical space facilitating shared activities.[68]

[67] Ismail, N. (2022). Commentary: It's no silver bullet, but did coalitions get social media right in Malaysia's GE15? Channel News Asia. Available from: https://www.channelnewsasia.com/commentary/malaysia-ge15-pn-ph-tiktok-youth-3092326

[68] Latham, A. and Layton, J. (2019). Social infrastructure and the public life of cities: Studying urban sociality and public spaces. Geography Compass, 13(7), p.e12444.

2. Establish or increase dedicated funding for youth organisations

Participants shared challenges with obtaining (adequate) funding from government agencies, even those dedicated to youth empowerment. Much of this hurdle is attributed to bureaucratic officers who form the link between the government and youth groups. Typically, youth organisations outside the urban Klang Valley cannot access resources and funding to run the necessary community programmes. A thorough review to enable access to necessary local, state or federal government resources and funding to enable youth empowerment is essential if the government is committed to making youth involved members of the democratic and national landscape. This can materialise in the form of:

- Dedicated youth organisation/movement start-up funding
- Engagement platforms between youth organisations and movements, with youth-focused government agencies

3. Implement a collaborative mentorship structure between senior leadership and youth potentials

Participants active in the democratic and political processes shared their disappointment with political parties that approached youth empowerment superficially. Despite overtures to 'involve' youths in the party's agenda, youth members are often relegated to low-priority importance and involvement. Among the key recommendations endorsed by participants is a mentorship structure between senior leadership and potential youth leaders. This initiative or programme will allow potential youth leaders to take up responsibilities and gain the necessary experience from senior members, while being given the necessary direction and guidance from more experienced party leaders. To some extent, this practice has been adopted by individual elected representatives in Pakatan Harapan, but it is not formalised within the larger parties of which they are a part. If political parties are committed to maintaining relevance with the younger generation of Malaysians, this mentorship programme would provide parties with the necessary upcoming generation of leadership who better understand youth aspirations and concerns.

Securing youth futures

The future is a key discussion among Malay youth participants. Much of the youth's future concerns involve their financial stability and long-term livelihood. Participants shared their anxieties about the increasing cost of living, stagnant wages and a constricting job market. While these issues are not exclusive to the youth constituency alone, their concerns stem from many graduates struggling with student loans, and cannot find employment that pays sufficiently to cover costs—not just for themselves, but their parent-dependents. That is, if they can even secure employment in their field of study. Among the interventions that the government can examine:

1. Future-proof the Malaysian education syllabus

There is a long-standing argument among the Malaysian public that the national education system is ill-equipped to fit upcoming Malaysians with the skills or knowledge necessary to navigate the future economy.[69] Much has been discussed on this subject, but it is worth repeating that the government needs to be committed to constantly evolving and adapting the education system and syllabus to anticipate future shifts in a globalised economy. This also entails integrating media and political literacy into the education syllabus to equip young Malaysians with the necessary tools to discern online (political) content. Doing this will ensure youths are better protected against bad-faith actors and manipulative agendas, especially during the election season.



Lecture on understanding harmony

[69] Sathian, M.R. and Ngeow, Y.M. (2014). Essentialising Ethnic and State Identities: Strategic Adaptations of Ethnic Chinese in Kelantan, Malaysia. Asian Studies Review, 38(3), pp.385–402.

2. Introduce and implement youth-targeted economic reforms

Given the challenging financial position of youths, it is prudent to introduce and implement youth-targeted economic programmes or reforms. While the government has (re-packaged) legacy programmes such as cash aids under eBelia Rahmah,[70] talent development and upskilling programmes, youth entrepreneurship funds, or considerations to revise education loan repayments[71]—improvements could further broaden economic support and mobility for youths. This is even more important outside the West Coast urban centres, where economic opportunities are extremely limited for youths. Participants in the **'Malay Heartlands'** expressed interest in developing their communities. There is an opportunity for the federal government to work with state and local governments to **'meremaja'** or rejuvenate economic opportunities outside urban capitals like the Klang Valley, Pulau Pinang island-side or Johor Bahru. This can materialise in the form of economic and cultural placemaking of targeted localities in the Northern and East Coast regions, by making these localities attractive to youths and investors, through the development of satellite socio-economic centres. This will reduce regional socioeconomic inequality, visibly and tangibly experienced by youths outside the West Coast.

3. Establish a long-term national roadmap

Among the key criticisms of 'Ekonomi MADANI', the current government's national economic roadmap is that it did not engage with youths in the country's broad direction. Socioeconomic interventions by the government thus far have not gained youth confidence. If the government is committed to commanding not just the confidence of youths, but also the Malaysian public, it is imperative to establish a decade-long roadmap, with youths as its major stakeholders. A similar project was accomplished with the previous Barisan Nasional government, called TN50. Reviving the roadmap, or charting an updated and improved one—while actively involving youths as its key stakeholders, would offer confidence in Malaysia's national, regional and international direction. It would also signal to youths that the government is committed to engaging with youth aspirations and their place in shaping the country's future.

[70] Basyir, M., Kamal, A. and Mahari, H. (2023). Govt may extend eBelia Rahmah next year. NST Online. Available from: https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2023/12/988638/govt-may-extend-ebelia-rahmah-next-year

[71] Free Malaysia Today. (2025). Govt may review PTPTN loan rates, repayment terms, says PM. Free Malaysia Today. Available from: https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2025/04/11/govt-may-review-ptptn-loan-rates-repayment-terms-says-pm/

Building inter-ethnic relationships

While Malay youth participants believed in Malaysia's multicultural DNA, there were acknowledgements that not enough was done to enable meaningful interactions and engagements between the different ethnic groups. However, one common experience shared across multiple participants was how the university space was seen as a safe and conducive space for youths of various backgrounds, whether race, religion or class, to engage with one another and form friendships. Applying 'contact hypothesis' to this situation, the university space can facilitate positive interactions and relationships between different ethnic groups, potentially reducing negative perceptions and feelings towards other ethnic groups.

1. **Create spaces for meaningful engagement between different ethnic groups**

   While these engagement spaces do not necessarily need to be tertiary education institutions, it is evident that (physical) spaces are necessary for community engagement and socialisation. These spaces may not need to be permanent infrastructures like universities or community or sports centres—they can also be temporary spaces, such as programmes that promote inter-group engagement or socio-cultural events that encourage youths to meet and interact with each other. The programmes in spaces can be designed to facilitate positive interactions between the different ethnic groups.



National pillars of Malaysia at MRT Merdeka Station

Conclusion

At the time of writing, Malaysia is at a juncture where public and private lives clash. Inter-faith relations are strained, populism is part of governance, and Malaysians struggle with bread-and-butter issues. Malay youths are not impervious to all these—they are indifferent but feel hopeless about their future. This is especially true for youths from rural areas and the B40 (bottom 40%) working class. Comments on social media such as TikTok reveal how they worry about income inequality and the future, with many turning to religious influencers, seeking prayers for sustenance. When it comes to racial sentiments, Malay youths are adamant about appreciating multiculturalism and blame the racial strife on politicians. Even then, it has to be on their terms: Islam first before everything else.

Groundwork for the next general elections has begun. Anwar Ibrahim's premiership is also being questioned, even by those who voted and supported him. The world, especially China, is pushing back against America's tariffs.[72] Indonesia[73] is seeing capital flight, and Malaysia is chairing the 2025 ASEAN. Where do our Malay and non-Malay youths fit in? When will their opinions be acknowledged, especially those outside the Klang Valley? Will all the work IMAN (and other think tanks) have done over the past two years come to nought?

[72] Chen, L. et al. (2025). Limited options push China into trade 'war of attrition' with Trump. Reuters. Available from: https://www.reuters.com/markets/limited-options-push-china-into-trade-war-attrition-with-trump-2025-04-08/

[73] The Jakarta Post. (2024). $323.4M in foreign capital pours out of domestic market: Bank Indonesia. The Jakarta Post. Available from: https://www.thejakartapost.com/business/2024/12/09/323-4m-in-foreign-capital-pours-out-of-domestic-market-bank-indonesia.html

Almost two years of fieldwork have proven that Malay(sian) youths are intelligent, observant, and want to play a significant role in the country's governance. They are shrewd political observers and deserve to be treated as such. Malaysia will be impacted in this new era of politics, as Malay youths do not suffer fools gladly. With the advent of AI, social media, and new portals of news and information like Discord, our youth will find ways to subvert politics despite being excluded from it. While many may still be involved with political parties, and some will be attracted to right-wing groups, many want a future in a country that acknowledges them and the future generation.

Evidently, this government's reputation among the Malay youths is damaged. The Unity Government is perceived as elitist, disconnected and disorganised. There is little space for Malay youths to get involved, as they do not have connections or family backgrounds. The Opposition—Perikatan Nasional, may not be a favourite of the youths, but PAS, especially, engages with communities on the ground and consistently takes the needs and desires of the people seriously.

As we wrap up this project, which has been illuminating to say the least, we plan on embarking on a wider nation-building project that includes all of our young people. We hope the Malaysian government sees our youth as more than just voters; they are truly the generation that will prosper the country. There is much work to be done, as we face global challenges. Malaysians of all races have the right to demand an inclusive future.