# The motivating factors of Malaysian youths political participation - an overview

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**ABSTRACT**

Currently it is observed that political participation by youth in Malaysia is increasingly less well received, this is because most of these people are more focused on their studies and their careers. Therefore this paper will discuss the factors that influence the political participation of youth in Malaysia. Among the factors that are highlighted are the Demographic factors, Leadership and Management Factors, the factor of the Leaders' Communication, Mass Media Factors and Social Environmental Factors that consists of Family Influence, Peer Influence and Influence of the Local Community. From these factors, to a certain extent we are able to more or less see in detail the problems that exist in the political participation of youth, which can also provide some input in the best way to encourage political participation of youth in Malaysia.

## Introduction

The voice of the youth is the main entity that brings continued development to a country. Every single individual has their own philosophy, autonomy and cultural freedom especially when it comes down to determining the direction that they are headed to (Phillip Mpofu, 2012), therefore it does not come as a surprise that the political involvement by the youth is not as well received as it should be, this is also not forgetting that the youth perceives politics as something that is only suited for the elderly and for those that only have vested interests.

According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia, there are a total of 12, 015.7 million young people in this country, based on the year 2000 census. A large number of them are not at all interested in politics. This argument is further supported by a research conducted by the Confederation of Peninsular Malay Students (Gabungan Pelajar Melayu Semenanjung, GPMS) which found out that 70 percent of the youth are not interested in politics, with 10 percent of them being pro government and another 20 percent are neutral.

For many of these young people, they have a tendency and are more likely to focus on their education and their employment in order to build a better life (Ahmad Atory Hussain, 2012). However, ever since the reformation era in September 1998, the involvement of the youth in politics grew and it began to open these young minds to be more involved in the political arena. To them, this reformation help open their minds in changing the political direction of the country so that it will become more fresh which is based on justice, human rights and democracy that is more mature and open (Selangor Youth Development Division, 2012)

The development and expansion of politics in Malaysia has opened the eyes of the political parties to become closer to the youth because they know that these young people are the voice that contributes to the continuity of a party. In particular, authority relations mainly create a harmonious atmosphere between the people and the government as well as between the party members and that will in turn reduce stress which is followed by the success of an administration, (HH Ecktein, 1966). According to Fuad Hassan, the youth is the most important asset to both the government and to the opposition especially in winning the 13th General Election, because out of the registered voters, this generation is represented by a total of 77.9 percent. This then is where the contesting parties must work diligently to ensure that this generation supports their party (Zulkifli Jalil & Maslih Kamil, 2012).

Due to this, a study was conducted to observe the motivating factors in which influenced the youth's participation in politics and at the same time, they gave their opinions on the best way to ensure that the participation of the youth in politics will continue flourishing and will not die one day.

## Youth political involvement factors

## Demography

Political participation is something that cannot be forced upon as there must be the willingness of an individual to be aware of matters relating to politics, because the values and awareness attitude of an individual has to be present, especially when it comes to being aware about issues relating to the rights of their relationship with others and the rights to themselves as someone staying in a democratic country (Almond & Verba, 1963). The lack of self-awareness in individuals, particularly in registering as a voter proved to be the primary reason as to why a large number of youths in Malaysia are not involved in politics and this is amplified further by studies in fourteen states, where a number of them in the age group of 22 to 40 years old have not registered to vote and the main factor being that the reason they do not vote is due to the lack of interests in politics while at the same time they are busy with their jobs, (Ibrahim Saad, 2008).

There is a very clear divide between the men and the women in their political participation. The men mostly dominate the political arena, regardless of whether they are part of any of the party's committee members, members of the Parliament or even the State Legislative Assembly (DUN). These are all

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mainly dominated by the men. In Malaysia the rate of female candidates elected as representatives of the Member of Parliament or State Assemblyman is seen to have improved but unfortunately at a very low and slow rate. In the year 1990, the involvement of women in politics was only at a rate of 5 percent whereas in the year 1999, the rate increased to 10 percent, and this rate remained even after the General Election in 2004. Thus, it is said that the growth of women being in the political field is at a level where they are equated to a small cocoon as it is less well received by the women in Malaysia. (Zaherawati Zakaria, 2008).

Gender and age levels are closely interrelated when viewed upon from the perspective of their involvement in Malaysian politics. Studies conducted in Johor found that more men participate in politics. Of the 422 respondents, a total of 284 people (67.3 %) are men involved in politics as compared to females that had only a total of 134 people (31.8%). Whereas, when looking at the age range, adults that are over 40 years of age, are more involved in the political arena in comparison to youths that are under 40 years old. Up till the age of 40, there is a total of 222 people (52.6 %) when compared to 422 people, whereas those below the ages of 40 years old has a total of 200 people (47.4 %). (Muhamad Fauzi *et al.*, 1999).

Based on the study of the political participation in the tenth General Election in 1999 in the parliamentary of Pagoh, Johor Baru and Batu Pahat in Johor, they found that out of 600 respondents, only 422 people who were analyzed, showed that most of them who are aware and care for the current political developments consists of a total of 166 government employees which is equivalent to 39.3 percent of the people, followed by the self-employed which totaled to 134 people or 31.8 percent and most of these people who are less involved in politics makes up 33 people, equivalent to 7.8 percent which are students (Muhammad Fauzi *et al.*, 1999).

In terms of the employment sector, there is also a great deal that affects individuals to be involved in politics. For civil servants, it may be said that these people are forced to and they have to support the existing government, despite the fact that in reality, not all civil servants do not support the policies implemented by the government. Looking at the current state of the political scenario in Malaysia now, it can be said that it is difficult to predict the results because when we look at the defeat of the Barisan Nasional party in their stronghold states of Selangor, Penang and also Kedah and Kelantan. This is the reason why questions arise, especially the doubt of loyalty in the civil servants towards the government, there is no transparency with leaking government secrets, the practice of Cronyism towards government projects and so on. Therefore, it may be said that not all civil servants are loyal to the Barisan Nasional government and not forgetting those that there are also a few who are opposed to government policies. (Ahmad Atory Husain *et al.*, 2004).

The level of education plays a very important role in the continuation of the political dynamics in Malaysia. Studies conducted in Johor in the year 1999 showed that the level of education is one of the important factors that drive and determine whether an individual is engaged in the political arena. However, studies show that those with the Malaysian Certificate of Education (SPM) and below are the ones that are most engaged in politics compared to those that are holding a degree or a diploma where they have a total of 229 people of 422 respondents which is 54.3 percent compared to those who only holds a degree or a diploma, has only 63 people or 14.9

percent and 46 people that is 10.9 percent, respectively (Muhammad Fauzi *et al.*, 1999).

The relationship between politics and education are certainly closely related to one another. Leaders who are elected to lead the people must have a higher education and must have at least a bachelor's degree. Besides, education also serves to influence young people into believing every single policy implemented by the government, this is because the education system that is being implemented has been developed and implemented and laid out by the government, which is also the same as in communist countries where they implement the *brain-washing method* system; that is a learning system used to influence young people's thoughts into understanding the doctrine of Communism. (Scribd, 2009).

According to Malaysiakini, young people or the youth are described as idealistic and *"anti-establishment"* where these young voters' supports are dependent on demographic factors and educational status of an individual. The higher the education level of an individual, they will be more open and more matured in making choices as to which political party they should choose and they are not easily distracted or influenced by their surroundings. This means that they will be able to determine which party should be in power to be the next ruling government and henceforth, this political party can lead the people towards development and prosperity. (Wan Abdul Rahman, 2010).

Overall, the influence of demography; that is the personal factor, is most important in determining the level of political involvement of an individual. Gender, education level, age and employment status are factors, which influence the political involvement as well. Most studies have shown that men dominantly participate in politics, whereas based on the level of education, highly educated people are keen to be involved in political activities. Occupation also showed, that more government employees are exposed to political matters than those who work in the private sectors. However looking at age groups, youths in their late 30's and adults are also actively involved in political activities.

**Leadership Influence of Political Party**

Leadership and management require people who are competent in leadership skill. People-oriented leaders are required to be the bridge and also to strengthen the relationship between leaders and the people. Studies conducted in the State Legislative Assembly (DUN) Bagan Pinang on October 11, the 2009 election found that 76 percent of the voting youth prefer candidates or leaders who are friendly to the people compared to the native candidate of the area. In addition, 66.6 percent of the youth fully support the Prime Minister's helm and 1 Malaysia concept; indirectly, this could attract youths to venture into politics, (Mohd Fuad Mat Jali *et. al,* 2011).

Youth's political involvement involves the management and leadership of a country. In Malaysia, it has become a norm of life which demands that the youth, especially university students, are not allowed to be involved in politics, even though the Universities and University Colleges Act (UUCA) was revised, in which amendments were made to allow university students to be involved in the political arena but it does not show significant changes among the youth in their involvement in politics and on top of that, university students who want to be involved in politics have to get permission and approval from the Vice-Chancellor as enshrined in the 2009 amendment of the UUCA, this makes it very difficult for the students to be active in politics and its effect can be seen in most of the youth, especially university students in which they do not want to get

involved or even be aware of political matters in Malaysia (Saifuddin Abdullah, 2010).

A study conducted by Ahmad Atory Husain and Malike Brahim upon 400 civil servants in each ministry showed that the personality of a candidate is something the voters look upon when choosing to vote. 81 percent of the civil servants have agreed that the most important key feature is their trustworthiness, apart from being decisive (firm), disciplined and responsible. Communication is also one of the most important mechanisms in presenting information to others; communication is something complex especially in delivering information and making the public understand what is being delivered (Robbins, 1984).

Without the command of good communication, a piece of information may not be successfully delivered to the audience. A systematic review of studies on the impact of communication indicates individuals' assumption that communication has a powerful influence on others and oneself (Richard, 1993).

Leadership skills and attitude can affect others and these are important and essential to every leader in ensuring that their leadership is well-accepted by the society, so that it will be easier for the leader to rule. According to the teachings of Islam, a leader who has a strong influence should be acknowledged by everyone. Some writings claim that an influential leader exists and was born with an attitude or a character worthy to be a leader, however, to be an influential leader one must undergo the process or training in which it would sharpen and shape their personality into becoming a good leader. Also, as a leader who is respected, one needs to fully devote their thinking for the benefit and well being of the community in order to earn rewards and blessing of Allah S.W.T. (Nurhelmi Ikhsan, n. d.).

Management and leadership must move in parallel lines so that the development plans can be done well. However, any management or any leader who would like to engage youths to be actively involved while giving support to the party, in order to achieve that of a party, must meet the demands of the youths. The results of studies conducted by the National Association of Muslim Youth (Persatuan Belia Islam Nasional [PEMBINA], 2009) revealed that the government's failure to get the youths to be interested in politics or to be active in associations, unlike back in the 1960s to the 1970s, is due to several factors which includes the influence of party politics in youth organization. The study has found that youths are only interested in the programs which are conducted by the associations under the Ministry of Youth and Sports (KBS), however whenever there are political elements in each of the programs, their interests in such programs decline and in turn there is less support and the involvement of youths diminishes. (PEMBINA, 2009)

The credibility of a political party or ruling government is the root in ensuring the victory of a party. As what happened in the 12th general election, the toppling over of Barisan Nasional (BN) is seen with the loss of two-thirds majority of their seats in parliament. This fall is because the majority of the people felt that BN was less sensitive towards the needs and wishes of the people, as well as their inefficiency in dealing with problems that occur and adding to that, the people also perceive BN as a corrupted party, arrogant, one that breaks promises and also bias, which lead them to their loss of two-thirds majority seats in parliament and which caused them the failure in maintaining the states that the party had strongholds before, like Selangor, Kedah, Penang and Kelantan (Worran Hj. Kabul *et al.,* 2008)

According to a research that was carried out with 5200 of youths from 20 Public Higher Educational Institutions (Institut Pengajian Tinggi Awam, IPTA), indicated that a government, which has goals and a clear direction, will be chosen to administer and manage the country. The study also found that 54.6 percent of respondents that chose Barisan Nasional (BN) to govern the country was done on the basis of the aspirations and commitments made while 45.7 percent would support BN in the next upcoming election. This party was chosen because they fight for and uphold religion and race, solves humanitarian issues and are good in development. In addition, this study also found that the respondents prefer Dato 'Seri Najib Tun Abdul Razak and labelled him as the most qualified person to be the Prime Minister of Malaysia and Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin as the best deputy to administer and manage the country. (Mohd Fuad *et al.,* 2009).

On the whole, based on the influence of political parties, it shows that the party, which the people are voting for, is the party that has clear goals and is continuously helping the people, especially in increasing their income; that will stand a better chance to run the country. There are also studies that show that people feel it's their duty to get involved in politics when they sense it is their responsibility in ensuring that a good government is formed in order to manage and administer our country, Malaysia.

## Influence of Mass Media

Mass media is the most important instrument in providing information to the society. The mainstream media such as television, radio, prime newspapers, and alternative media such as blogs, Facebook, Twitter, and web sites are the most accessible medium and are able to influence a person in making decisions (Turner, 1972)

The result of the research done on a group of youth from a few selected areas which are under the ruling of Barisan Nasional (BN) and Pakatan Rakyat (PR) shows that out of 8823 respondents, 86 percent obtained their information from the television and 81 percent from the mainstream newspapers. However, the alternative media such as internet and blogs are not frequently used by this group of youth. The result of the research also found that the efficiency of Internet usage is only at 51 percent and found that most of the users that receive their information are from the Chinese community, that is 55 percent, which is quite high when compared to the other races. Comparatively, 71 percent trust the resources from the mainstream media like television and newspapers whereas only 42 percent to 50 percent of readers trust the alternative media. This somehow proves the ability of mainstream media in influencing youth on any political information including all the crises that are faced by the political parties and this group of youth believes that every single information from newspapers and television is more accurate and reliable as compared to the alternative media such as political blogs and websites which are less valid (Samsudin A. Rahim, n.d.).

It is undeniable that compared to alternative media, mainstream media is more influential towards the society. A research that was done at three parliamentary areas in Johor which are Pagoh, Batu Pahat and Johor Baharu which consists of 422 respondents, shows that the mainstream media like television, radio and newspapers are more capable in influencing a person towards the information that are received. Barisan Nasional has more privileges in mass media because most of the media in Malaysia seems to be on their side, contrary to Pakatan Rakyat whom are only able to use their own production of

newspapers like Harakah and Suara Keadilan. For this reason, more Malaysians support the government and believe in the effectiveness of the management and leadership of Barisan Nasional (Muhammed Fauzi Othman et al., 1999).

Social media can be found from the Internet, including blogs, photos and files sharing systems like Flicker, SlideShare, Youtube, and social networking sites, for example Friendster, MySpace and SecondLife. Although most of these media were created for personal usage, political speech and actions to dispute the actions of the government and to express their dissatisfaction towards any party sometimes do exist in the form of postings on YouTube and through the use of Facebook (Maja, 2010). The study done by CNN news in America during the election of candidates for president in 2009 found that these candidates used 'YouTube-ification' to show the voters their credibility as a leader. This internet-based social media is an important tool as a politicking site (Maja & Nicholas, 2010).

There are studies done on the 12th General Election (GE) that revealed that factor of the mass media greatly influenced voters at that time. As informed, media as a whole are more supportive towards the Barisan Nasional (BN). All efforts and actions performed by BN always get attention and extensive coverage by the media. This is the very reason why research has shown that news that is being aired, praises the government while condemning and belittling the efforts made by the opposition party has caused the hatred and disgust toward the news produced by the mainstream media. As a result, people do not trust the leadership of the incumbent government and many have boycotted the news released by the mainstream media.

For this reason, it is clearly proven that the condemning news released by the mainstream media has an impact on the Barisan Nasional government that had led to BN's failure to take control of the two thirds majority of the seats in parliament in the 12th GE and instead had enabled the opposition to expand its share on the 4 states that used to be considered as BN's stronghold states, namely Selangor, Kedah, Pulau Pinang and Kelantan. The study also found that the impact of alternative media such as Internet and blogging are higher influences as compared to the mainstream news such as newspapers, radio and television (Mohammad Nor Othman et al., 2008).

A study that was done in France with a total of 389 respondents found that the majority of people agree that mass media, especially television does not help to influence a person's political participation, particularly in support of any party, but by having forums and delivering information directly to the community is the most effective way to influence one's political involvement (Jack M. et al., 1999).

Overall, previous studies show that the influence of the mass media in influencing political participation of the youth is very high and can influence a person's political participation; however there are also previous studies that show that the mass media is not the main factor of a political involvement as shown in the study performed by Jack M. and his friends in France. Similarly even if the medium that was used at first were television and newspapers as a reference for political matters, nonetheless the growing use of the technology have shown that Facebook, blogs and websites are also used as a source of reference for someone, especially to find out the current political situation.

**Influence of Social Environment**

Family is the most frequent cluster that communicates with an individual. Attitudes, behaviour and everyday routines are capable of influencing the attitude of family members. A

research done on youths ranging from ages 21 to 40 years revealed that 29.9 percent of the 5223 respondents that were selected, states that family factors or family traditions encourages family members, particularly the youth, to support a political party or to get involved with political activities. However, the factor of interest is the main determinant in leading the political participation of the youth with 44.7 percent, followed by family factors and the least would be foreign influence at only 10.2 percent (Youth Development Research Institute of Malaysia, 2011).

A study done by researchers in political socialization suggests that political involvement is not necessarily influenced by the parents alone, but individual political participation is influenced by social conditions, personality, political beliefs, individual behaviour and group behaviourial patterns (Jack Dennis et al., 1971). A study in France showed that both parents do not help the process of politicizing a society but this claim is not aided by strong evidence. Even in the United States, it showed that individual political involvement could not be obtained from the parents, but depended on the individuals themselves (Converse et al., 1987).

Peers are the closest people to any individual, which it is also true for each and every youth in Malaysia. For this group, they are easily influenced by their peers, especially in joining activities. In the new politics, this group is the most important asset in ensuring the formation of the government in the future. Therefore the initiative shown by the Barisan Nasional government is to establish political socialization that encourages open thinking among youths in Malaysia and it was undertaken to evolve politics in the form of political *tarbiyah* and inculcation of values, beliefs and political behaviours in accordance with Vision 2020. That is why various youth associations have been created, such as the Association of Youth and Sports, Peer Counsellors Association and a host of other social and religious association, which is a major source for these young people to know the political situation and to then be actively involved in politics (Mohamad Md Yusoff, 2011).

There have also been studies that have shown that peer group is not the main cause of youth involvement in politics. Studies done with youths who are able to vote which are aged between 21 years to 40 years points out that peer factors that can influence the political participation of youth stands only 22.8 percent of 5223 respondents as compared to the interest factor of 44.7 percent and family influence, 29.9 percent to the political participation of youths. According to the research, the peer factor is not able to influence individuals to actively participate in politics because the tendency of the youth to be interested in politics is dependent only on one's interest to get involved in politics. If a respondent's friends are interested in politics and they frequently discuss political matters when they are out together or if there are family members of respondents who are actively involved in a political organization, it is still not enough to influence the individual to get involved in politics (Youth Development Research Institute of Malaysia, 2011).

Malaysia's political involvement of young people is certainly less well received, in addition with the mentality and lackadaisical attitude this increases their already lack of interest to venture into the political scene. However, there is a negative attitude among Malaysians, especially the adult and older group. This group is said to not have a sense of trust and confidence in young people, especially those students whom are receiving higher education. The youths are often undermined. Tactics are used to scare the youth and to restrain their freedom as the older

group is still locked in the old conventional political framework that does not understand the current reality, among other things (Almond & Verba, 1963). This is coupled with the syndrome of "anti-thinking" and "anti-intellectual" where the adults are often rejecting and are not happy with the ideas that were debated or argued by youths. With such threats, it causes the youths to be less interested to engage and be involved in politics (Saifuddin, A., 2011).

In terms of the influence of the social environment as a whole, there are many results of the study that indicate that parents and family are the main factors of political participation of an individual. However, there are also studies that show that the influence of peers and the community can affect an individual's political participation, but the observation that has been made from previous studies also show that as a whole, the effect of all the social environment such as family, friends and the local community which have relationship or relationships with one another in particular, are able to influence a person's political participation.

## Conclusion

Overall, youth involvement in politics at present is still at a moderate level, most of this group of people would rather be nonpartisan voters, which means that they are not in favour of any political party. It does not only have an impact on the political parties in winning the future General Elections but the long-term effects can be seen when looking for the successor to be the leader that continues to propel the country. Therefore, the political parties should give some space and trust to the youth to become leaders of the communities and they also need to provide support to the generation of leaders of the country.

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