



**FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES**

**TOWARDS GOVERNMENT INSTITUTIONAL REFORM:  
POLITICAL AWARENESS AMONG MALAYSIAN YOUTHS**

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TOWARDS GOVERNMENT INSTITUTIONAL REFORM:  
POLITICAL AWARENESS AMONG MALAYSIAN YOUTHS

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## **ABSTRACT**

When Perikatan Nasional (PN) came into power during the global pandemic, they gave financial aid such as incentives, monetary one-off supports and loan moratorium which the public deeply appreciates, but particularly the ones with lower socioeconomic status. It was believed that if Pakatan Harapan was still in power, there would not be as much financial aid as what PN has given. The research seeks to understand if there is a link between socioeconomic status and Malaysian youths' perception on reform of government institutions in Malaysia. This is a mixed method study, where the survey questionnaire is used on the Google Forms platform in order for respondents to be able to answer it online. A total of 120 respondents were a part of this study. Due to the small population sample, the findings did not achieve the intended results. The data gathered has proven that despite the differences in socioeconomic background leading to different socioeconomic status, it is not definite that an individual with a lower socioeconomic status is only focused on surviving and prioritizes improving the economy due to livelihood issues. It is also the same in reverse, where just because an individual has a higher socioeconomic status, it does not mean that they prioritize reforming the government from the core, such as the parliament or governance. The research has proven that each individual has different opinions, and a higher or lower socioeconomic status is not necessarily a factor that affects their judgment.

**Keyword:** socioeconomic status, institutional reform, Pakatan Harapan, Perikatan Nasional



## **ABSTRAK**

*Apabila Perikatan Nasional (PN) berkuasa semasa pandemik global, mereka memberikan bantuan kewangan seperti insentif, sokongan wang secara one-off, dan moratorium pinjaman yang amat dihargai oleh orang ramai, terutamanya yang mempunyai status sosioekonomi yang lebih rendah. Ia dipercayai bahawa jika Pakatan Harapan masih berkuasa, tidak akan ada bantuan kewangan sebanyak apa yang PN berikan. Penyelidikan ini bertujuan untuk memahami sama ada terdapat kaitan antara status sosioekonomi dan persepsi belia Malaysia terhadap reformasi institusi kerajaan. Ini adalah kajian kaedah campuran, di mana soal selidik tinjauan digunakan pada platform Google Forms agar responden dapat menjawabnya secara atas talian. Seramai 120 orang responden merupakan sebahagian daripada kajian ini. Oleh kerana sampel populasi yang kecil, penemuan tidak mencapai keputusan yang diharapkan. Data yang dikumpul telah membuktikan bahawa walaupun terdapat perbezaan latar belakang sosioekonomi yang membawa kepada status sosioekonomi yang berbeza, tidak pasti individu yang mempunyai status sosioekonomi yang lebih rendah hanya tertumpu kepada kelangsungan hidup dan mengutamakan peningkatan ekonomi kerana isu sara hidup. Begitu juga sebaliknya, di mana hanya kerana seseorang individu itu mempunyai status sosioekonomi yang lebih tinggi, ia tidak bermakna mereka mengutamakan reformasi kerajaan dari terasnya, seperti parlimen atau tadbir urus. Penyelidikan ini telah membuktikan bahawa setiap individu mempunyai pendapat yang berbeza, dan status sosioekonomi yang lebih tinggi atau lebih rendah tidak semestinya menjadi faktor yang mempengaruhi pertimbangan mereka.*

*Kata kunci: status sosioekonomi, reformasi institusi, Pakatan Harapan, Perikatan Nasional*

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.0. Introduction

The sudden existence of COVID-19 has managed to disrupt the world in every aspect. However, it particularly displays the priorities of the state government. In Malaysia, the recent power-struggle between the past ruling government, *Pakatan Harapan* (Alliance of Hope, PH or Pakatan), and newly-formed coalition *Perikatan Nasional* (PN), have shown how Malaysians' wellbeing and the state of Malaysia, is completely disregarded by Malaysian politicians.

In 2018, Malaysia's 14<sup>th</sup> General Election (GE), Malaysia recorded history when for the first time since the independence of Malaysia, *Barisan Nasional* (National Front, BN) won less seats than the opposition coalition, PH, thus losing their 60 years long status as the ruling government of Malaysia (Edwards, 2018). The major reason for the win was Najib's scandal concerning the sovereign-wealth fund 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) that launched in 2009. The purpose of the 1MDB fund was to make strategic investments for national benefit. In 2015, Malaysia's government probe found a deposit of \$700 million USD in Najib's personal accounts, allegedly from 1MDB (Wright & Clark, 2015). The probe was due to confrontations of political intervention and irregular accounting in the management of the 1MDB fund. The saga of the 1MDB fund was not easy to understand to the public, and a survey by Malaysia's Merdeka Center for Opinion Research in March 2015 confirmed the statement. According to the research, only 29% believes they knew "quite a lot" about the case, 30% were barely aware and 39%, the majority were completely unaware of the 1MDB case (Weiss, 2019). Pakatan candidates capitalized on the scandal and worked hard to explain about the case in simple terms, all the while attacking Najib and his wife

Rosmah's extravagant wealth and even as a means to fuel the anger of the public. That, combined with the campaign strategies implemented by the coalition worked greatly in favour of Pakatan, resulting in the unexpected GE14 win.

However, PH only had the privilege of being the ruling government for two years, after which the Sheraton Move happened and triggered then Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir into resigning from the Chairman position of *Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia* (Bersatu) coalition. His move effectively collapsed PH as the ruling government due to losing its Parliamentary majority (New Straits Times, 2020) and gave way for the PN coalition to take the reins of Malaysia. The mentioned political events that unfold had angered Malaysians, who then started labelling the PN government as the "backdoor" government, due to the lack of ethics in their power-struggle to become the ruling government. The PN government were not elected by the public, and former Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin was definitely not voted by the people, and that sparked a hashtag called #NotMyPM to be trending on Twitter Malaysia.

Despite the anger and reproachments for the PN government, the latest Malacca state election resulted in a whopping win for BN, which was quite shocking considering that in the GE14 only three years ago, BN was outvoted. The situation brings forth the question, have Malaysians forgotten the reason they voted for PH in the first place, which was the promise of institutional reform? The promise of change for Malaysia, the promise of hope? And if so, what was the reason for the collective change of heart? The research seeks to investigate the perception of Malaysian youths on reform of government institutions in Malaysia and determine whether socioeconomic status influenced the perception.

### **1.1. Background of study**



In Malaysia, individuals aged between 15 to 40 are considered youths. Since Malaysia's Independence Day, eligible voters for the election were those aged 21 and above but as of 2021, Malaysia has lowered the voting age to 18 years old and above. Therefore, this paper will consider those aged 18 to 40 as youth voters. According to Dimock (2019), Millennials are people born from 1981 to 1996, and Generation Z are people born from 1997 to 2012. This makes the youth in Malaysia a combination of Millennials and Generation Z. While Millennials have experienced the world before the existence of smartphones, Generation Z are considered digital natives as smartphones have existed since they were born (Parker & Igielnik, 2020). As such, the youth in Malaysia did not refer to traditional media for information, instead, they prefer the use of new media, which is on basis the same as traditional media, except it is delivered digitally. While there are still people who read the news on the daily morning newspaper, the youths scroll their social media as soon as they wake up. Social media is diverse, and contains current local and international news as well as entertainment, which is why the current youths are said to be the most well-educated generation compared to the others.

Socioeconomic status (SES) is defined as the social standing or class of an individual or group and measured as a combination of education, income and occupation ("Socioeconomic Status", n.d.). For the purpose of this research, SES will be measured by education, income and occupation. In Malaysia, majority of the public identify themselves according to the household income classification, and on social media they will interact on discussions with each other according to these classifications. SES has become a sort of identity for the mass public, and they can relate to each other by using these classifications. An example would be a

discourse on the social media platform called Twitter, regarding affordable housing. The ones interacting and in favour of it would be the B40s and M40s, as rarely do T20s engage in a discourse that they do not relate to.

Being a democratic country, one would think that freedom of expression in Malaysia is a given, such as in America. However, that is not the case in Malaysia. Where the media in America are free to openly criticize and attack the government, doing so in Malaysia would mean being fined or imprisoned. Control of media by the government results in biased and manipulated information spread to the public, which means that the public are not aware of what actually happens behind the scenes of politics. Control of media correlates with the lack of transparency in the government. It is no secret that the Malaysian government does not practice transparency, and that is mainly the reason citizen journalism is so rampant in Malaysia. Any information regarding the corruption in the government that the public has come to gather are from citizen journalists on social media who have been religiously investigating the issues on their own. Not to forget the fact that the people spreading details of corruption scandals online will be hunted by the police, regardless of whether they were using anonymous or public accounts. The current example being a one “*Edisi Siasat*” (ES) twitter account, to the point they were called a ‘whistleblower’ by the government (Aiman, 2021). On the rare occasion that a government official is outed as corrupt, there are rarely any repercussions.

## **1.2. Problem statement**

Institutional reform is the process of reviewing and restructuring state institutions so that they respect human rights, preserve the rule of law, and are accountable to their constituents (“Institutional Reform, including Vetting”, 2021).

For purposes here, institutional reform specifically touches on a) vetting, which means examining backgrounds of the personnel and sanctioning abusive and corrupt officials; and b) transforming legal frameworks, which means reforming or creating new legal frameworks, such as adopting constitutional amendments.

It was said that when PH was in power, they were focused on gradually reforming the institution (Lee, 2018). However, a survey by Ilham Centre in 2021 showed that Malay Muslims prioritize bread and butter issues over institution reform (Malaysiakini, 2021). For context, bread and butter issues consists of issues directly relating to their survival and livelihood such as poverty and high cost of living. When PN came into power during the global pandemic, they gave financial aid such as incentives, monetary one-off supports and loan moratorium which the public deeply appreciates, but particularly the ones with lower SES. It was believed that if PH was still in power, there would not be as much financial aid as what PN has given. This is derived from Tun Mahathir's own speech, where he mentioned that the PH government is unable to provide free money to the citizens, a practice done by the BN government, due to the fact that a major percentage of the state's income is used to pay off the debts and loan interests left by the BN government (Azmi, Amly, Abdullah & Yunus, 2018). Thus this brings forth the question of whether higher or lower SES influences the voters' preference of immediate, individual benefits such as cash and gifts or long-term, deferred benefits of institutional reforms such as health care or free education policy programs (Scott, 1972) and abolishing corruption among government officials. In Indonesia, Shin (2015) has discovered that citizens in Jakarta who prefer the patronage benefits such

as jobs and money were the poorer and less educated, while the wealthier and educated citizens prefer programmatic policies such as free education.

In light of the current state of Malaysia's economy during COVID-19, it is difficult to gauge if Malaysians has had a change of heart in choosing a ruling government and if so, the factors influencing the change. Despite BN's loss in GE14, the latest Malacca state election has shown that BN is still a formidable opponent with loyal supporters. The study aims to investigate the perception of Malaysian youths on reform of government institutions in Malaysia and determine whether Malaysian youths' perception on reform of government institutions in Malaysia is influenced by SES. The research also seeks to gain a broader perspective by targeting Malaysian youths of all ethnics and religion. The inspiration behind this study was due to the power-grabbing move of the "Sheraton Move", which was a blatant disregard to the people of Malaysia, as they were not the government that was voted by the people. The 'Sheraton Move' proves that Malaysia's governance system is fickle and can be taken advantage of. Hence, it is vital to understand if SES influences Malaysian youths' perception on reform of government institutions in Malaysia, in order to decide on a course of action to improve the political landscape of Malaysia as a democratic country.

### **1.3. Research question**

1. What are Malaysian youths' perception on reform of government institutions in Malaysia?
2. Is there a link between the socioeconomic status of Malaysian youths and the political awareness on government institutional reform?

### **1.4. Research objective**

1. To investigate the political awareness of Malaysian youths on government institutional reform.
2. To explore the link between the socioeconomic status of Malaysian youths and the political awareness on government institutional reform.

### **1.5. Significance of study**

This study's findings will benefit the society in terms of providing an insight into understanding the perception of Malaysian youths on reform of government institutions and determining whether SES influences the perception. The current state of Malaysia's political landscape justifies the importance of understanding how SES influences and affect the community as a whole. Fellow researchers, policy-makers and non-governmental organizations would benefit in deciding the importance of awareness campaigns to improve political literacy for Malaysia's youth. For the researcher, the findings will provide a better understanding on the level of awareness and political participation of Malaysia's political system by the Malaysian youths.

### **1.6. Summary**

This chapter discusses the introduction, background of study, problem statement, research question, research objective and the significance of study. The introduction provides a summary of PH's win in the GE14, the reason behind BN's loss, and the 'Sheraton Move' by the current PN government in order to wrestle power from the PH government. The background of study further explains the definition of youth according to Malaysia's context, the socioeconomic status in Malaysia, and the lack of transparency in the political landscape, which correlates to the lack of freedom of expression in Malaysia. Next, the problem statement states

the reason this research is conducted, which is PH's major cause of winning the GE14, their election manifestos that consists of institutional and political reform. It is still unclear the reason for the people of Malacca to vote for BN's candidates but some of the speculations was that the public has had enough of the twists in politics, and would just like a stable political scene for once. The research question and research objectives shows the focus of this research, and the significance of study outlines the benefit of this research to the public.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **2.0. Literature Review**

This chapter outlines the literature review for the conduct of the study. It is divided into six parts: (1) socioeconomic status in Malaysia; (2) political awareness of the Malaysian youths; (3) the report “Institutional reform in Malaysia: Malay Muslims views and sentiment” by ILHAM Centre; (4) institutional reform during Pakatan Harapan’s governance; (5) institutional reform during Perikatan Nasional’s governance; and (6) alleged corruption issues during Perikatan Nasional’s governance, which will be discussed in the coming section.

#### **2.1. Socioeconomic status in Malaysia**

The socioeconomic status in Malaysia for this study is measured in terms of education level, income classification and occupation.

The education level in Malaysia is measured from: (1) Primary education; (2) Secondary education – Malaysian Certificate of Education (SPM) or Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET); (3) Post-secondary education – Matriculation, Malaysian Higher School Certificate (STPM) or University (Foundation); and (4) Higher education – University (Diploma, Bachelor’s Degree, Masters and PhD).

Next, the income classification in Malaysia is measured by median monthly income per household and grouped into: (1) T20 (households earning RM10,960 and above); (2) M40 (households earning RM4850 up to RM10,959); and (3) B40 (households earning below RM2500 up to RM4849). According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia (DoSM) (2020), the highest median income was W.P. Kuala

Lumpur with RM10,549, followed by W.P. Putrajaya with RM9,983, Selangor with RM8,210, W.P. Labuan with RM6,726, Johor with RM6,427, Pulau Pinang with RM6,169 and Melaka with RM6,054. This shows that the remaining nine states, Pahang, Perak, Negeri Sembilan, Kelantan, Terengganu, Perlis, Kedah, Sabah and Sarawak has a median income of less than RM6,054. Malaysia also stated that there were 405,441 poor households in 2019 when restructuring the poverty line income (PLI) from RM980 to RM2,208. The survey in 2019 further reported that 33.6% (2.4 million households) had at least five people; 21% (1.53 million) had four people; 19.3% (1.4 million) had three people; 18.4% (1.34 million) had two people; and 7.7% (559,800) were single-person households. This shows that households with at least five people were the majority in Malaysia, and the report by the Household Income and Basic Amenities Survey (HIS) in 2019 reported that out of the 405,441 poor households, 70.4% had at least five members while 13.3% had four. This clearly proves that household size directly affects poverty in Malaysia due to the number of mouths to feed is bigger than the median household income.

Lastly, occupation in Malaysia is categorised by the 2008 Malaysian Standard Classification of Occupations (MASCO-08), as: (1) Managers; (2) Professionals; (3) Technicians and associate professionals; (4) Clerical support workers; (5) Service and sales workers; (6) Skilled agricultural, forestry and fishery workers; (7) Craft and related trades workers; (8) Plant and machine-operators and assemblers; and (9) Elementary occupations. However, the MASCO-08 category were not used in grouping the respondents for the data collection. Instead, the data collection grouped the respondents according to: (1) Housewife/ Househusband; (2) Private sector employee; (3) Government sector employee; (4) Self-employed; (5) Unemployed;