

Asia-Ready Webinar Series

Understanding Malaysia Politics: What Do Youth Want?

The Asia-Ready Webinar Series is co-curated with various partners to allow youth to gain a better appreciation of the regional developments and a greater awareness of Singapore's interconnectivity with the regional markets.

Sat, 5 Nov 2022

10:30 AM - 11:30 AM

Online Event



About the Webinar

Speaker

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Synopsis

As Malaysia gears up for an early General Election (GE), the youth vote has never been more important. Malaysia's 15th GE will see an unprecedented increase in the influence of youth concerns, as the voting age was lowered in 2019, from 21 to 18 – the electorate size has

been increased by 5.8 million new voters to around 21 million total voters. Given the importance of the youth vote, the outcome of the GE will have to factor in key concerns for those in this age group. In a 2022 Merdeka Center poll of Muslim youths, some of the key issues that surfaced were: youth employment, environment protection, and identity politics concerning race and religion. Political parties will need to present effective policy solutions to these issues to capture the increasingly important youth vote. This webinar will highlight the key election issues up for contention among youths in Malaysia.

This webinar is brought to you by the National Youth Council (NYC) and the Singapore Institute of International Affairs (SIIA).

What We've Learnt

Basics of Malaysia Politics

Malaysia's political arena consists of a large number of political parties. This includes the three major national coalitions – Barisan Nasional, Perikatan Nasional and Pakatan Harapan. Newly formed Gerakan Tanah Air, youth-focused Malaysian United Democratic Alliance, regional coalitions Gabungan Parti Sarawak, Gabungan Rakyat Sabah and Warisan Party are also prominent parties. The country's political scene is deeply divided, with a multi-party system.

Malaysia's general election will be held on 19 November 2022. The primary issues of this election include the country's struggling economy amidst global inflation and rising cost of living, as well as Malaysia's continued recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic. Race, religion and values will continue to inform voting preferences. Government corruption and scandals will also be at the forefront of the election, as the major coalitions shape their campaigns around promises of stability versus competency.

The Youth Vote

In 2019, the Malaysian parliament passed the constitutional amendment 'Undi18' (Vote18), which introduced automatic voter registration for all citizens above 18, and made youths aged 18 to 21 eligible to vote. This amendment adds an estimated 5-6 million new voters to the electorate, making the youth bloc a potentially more significant pool of voters. For parties which have framed their political campaign around youth issues, this new bloc of voters is especially important.

However, there is still concern that youths will not come out to vote. Although citizens are automatically registered, voting remains non-compulsory. Despite the strong turnout of youth voters in previous elections, critics observe that political apathy may persist as an issue, in part due to the political instability in the government over the last few years. Political parties have thus modified their campaigning, attempting to appeal to youth voters through social media.

The diversity of youth voters should not be ignored. Encompassing voters from the age of 18 to 39, the interests of youths across this wide age range will greatly differ. Voters under 25

are likely to still be schooling, recently graduated or new entrants to the workforce. These voters may have the greater ability to explore different values, styles and ways of life, and thus approach politics in a more abstract manner. Voters above 25 have different political and economic demands, desiring stability as they settle into their careers and focus on making a living to support themselves and their families.

The voting preferences of youth voters further differ based on their locality. Youth voters residing in urban metropolitan areas may tend to have more liberal leanings towards reform-minded politicians. On the other hand, youth voters living in rural areas have more fundamental concerns regarding development and the building of infrastructure. Rural youth voters may also be more conservative and not necessarily reform-minded. Hence, the general assumption that the influx of youth voters would automatically result in liberal candidates and parties being elected should not be made.

Understanding the dynamic of Malaysian youth voters in terms of age and locality will therefore be crucial to address the varied needs of the youth bloc. Demographic factors such as race and religion further add a layer of complexity to the diversity of voters. While youths may typically be associated with liberal ideologies and parties, this does not hold throughout the entire youth electorate.

Questions Answered

by Dr Oh Ei Sun

What would be the major tipping point for the youth vote in Malaysia?

A tipping point refers to the motivation for the youths to vote. Apathy remains strong among the younger generation, especially for the youths below 25 years old. This demographic tends to be more apathetic, choosing to focus their attention on the internet and social media. For the older portion of youth voters (typically above 25 years old), the further faltering of the economy will motivate them to come out to vote against the incumbent party.

How significant is the problem of increased cost of living in Malaysia?

While the official inflation number is very low, ranging from two to six per cent, inflation can be felt by the sharp increase of prices of everyday necessities such as food and beverages. This has caused upset among the population.

How can we recognize the problems and issues that Malaysia's youth are facing, when they are such a diverse and heterogeneous group?

It is certainly possible that some groups are missing out when addressing youth issues. When looking at the general landscape of Malaysia politics and the predilections of youth voters in particular, demographic factors such as age, race and religion have to be taken into account. People of different backgrounds have different issues that worry them. For example, youth voters who stay in rural areas may prioritise the capability of a government

to develop and build infrastructure. Youth voters who stay in the urban centres however may afford to focus on more liberal or reformist policies. This demographic variety thus makes it integral to fully understand the complexity of Malaysian politics.

How useful is it to look at the youth as a bloc, given the diversity of youths in this category? Are the concerns of the youth voters affecting the elections in any significant way?

Many party platforms and manifestos have gone out of their way to address the concerns of the youth, such as the availability of jobs and access to decent living. These concerns are also shared by older voters, but since youth voters are most immediately concerned with job availability as they enter the workforce, parties target their messaging towards the youth. Politicians have also adapted their campaigning to appeal to the youth through social media.

Is the political move to lower the voting age to 18 biased? What kind of effects will lowering the voting age have and are youths responsible enough to vote?

One may immediately have a bias against younger voters, due to a tendency to think that young people are solely reform-minded, very liberal, progressive and wanting change. This may be true in societies such as Singapore which is highly metropolitan and urbanized. Malaysia however has urban, suburban and rural areas. Depending on their educational backgrounds, young voters can also be more conservative and less reform-minded. An example can be found in the Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS), a conservative Islamic party. Within PAS, the youth wing has been more active in pushing the conservative agenda compared to the ulama wing, which is the senior wing of the party led by religious leaders. In this regard, we tend to carry a bias when we try to assume the voting preferences of the younger demographic, believing that an increase in youth voters would naturally result in the election of reformist and more liberal parties and candidates. This is not necessarily true as young people can also vote for conservative candidates.

Is the field of political parties too crowded, given the fractured nature of Malaysia's political arena, and what is the effect of having so many political parties?

Having so many political parties certainly confuses people. When there are a plethora of parties, voters may not be entirely familiar with the ideology of certain parties. Without knowing about the party's ideology, voting for them will be difficult. Voters may also be turned off by the large number of parties. Malaysia's politics is personality-based, where each politician desires to be their own boss, resulting in politicians' tendency to form their own political party which they head. This causes the large number of political parties in Malaysia. To avoid confusion, identify the politicians leading the parties.

What are the main struggles that Malaysian youths are currently facing, how can Singaporean youths relate, and what are the areas of collaboration between Malaysian and Singaporean youths to create a positive impact?

With the varied developments and progression between both countries, the citizens of each country would have differing concerns. In Singapore, young people are trying to create more social space for themselves, and for their values and causes. Malaysia also has similar movements, but they are primarily in the urban areas. The struggle in rural areas is more fundamental, where voters have to prioritise development or a certain set of conservative values. There are commonalities among the urban youth of Malaysia and Singapore. In order to move forward more peacefully, we have to gain a deeper understanding to the aspirations of the rural youths of Malaysia, to provide them with adequate infrastructure and education, along with preventing radicalisation. This understanding and subsequent effort to cater to the needs of the rural youth is something that urban youths can work on.

Do youths feel a connection to youth parties and youth politicians?

The urban youth is very attracted to MUDA (Malaysian United Democratic Alliance). The MUDA party presents themselves as a party with younger aspirations, which attracts urban young voters. They have recently managed to win a seat in the Johor elections in a suburb. However, they have difficulties making inroads with the rural youths of Malaysia. Regionalism was also played up in Sabah and Sarawak. While some voters maintain only voting for regional parties, others are more open to voting for West Malaysia parties.

What are some recommendations and resources for Singaporean youths to learn more about Malaysia politics?

The Merdeka Center conducts scientific and rigorous polling, and their results will be useful in understanding the sentiments of the population. The media outlet FMT also frequently publishes political reports. The best way for youths in Singapore to understand Malaysia politics is still to visit Malaysia. Going beyond Johor Bahru or Malacca to visit other parts of Malaysia may help to understand the country more.