

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF MINORITY YOUTH IN MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to present the political participation of six ethnic minority youth, namely the Baba Nyonya, Portuguese, Chitty, Sikh, Orang Asli, and Siamese in Peninsular Malaysia. Political studies that are often focused on the majority ethnicity have led to the importance of the ethnic minority studies being addressed in explaining the problem of social inequality encountered. Although these minority ethnic groups are small in number, they are also an important bloc in some densely-populated parliamentary constituencies. In such areas, they are the “king maker” when there is a fierce competition between the two contesting parties. The quantitative research approach using the survey method was carried out in this study. A total of 300 respondents from six minority ethnic groups aged 21 to 40 years were involved in this study. The data was analyzed using statistical tests. The findings show that ethnic minority youth are moderately involved in Malaysian politics. There are 47.7% of the respondents who wish to vote for the ruling party in the coming GE-14. This phenomenon provides the importance of ethnic minority youth in helping to restore and balance support to the ruling party in the coming general election. The insignificant participation of ethnic minority youth not only in voting but in the democratic processes as affected the community development.

Keywords: Youth, Minority Ethnic, Political Participation

ABSTRAK

Makalah ini bertujuan membentangkan penyertaan politik belia etnik minoriti khususnya Baba Nyonya, Portugis, Chetti, Sikh, Orang Asli, dan Siam di Peninsula Malaysia. Kajian politik yang seringkali tertumpu kepada etnik majoriti telah menjurus kepada pentingnya kajian etnik minoriti diberi perhatian dalam menjelaskan masalah ketidaksamaan sosial yang dihadapi. Walaupun bilangan etnik minoriti adalah kecil, mereka juga satu blok penting di beberapa kawasan parlimen yang padat dihuni oleh golongan etnik minoriti. Di kawasan itu, mereka adalah “king maker” apabila terdapat persaingan yang sengit antara dua parti yang bertanding. Pendekatan kuantitatif menggunakan kaedah tinjauan telah dijalankan dalam kajian ini. Seramai 300 orang responden dari enam kumpulan etnik minoriti yang berumur 21-40 tahun telah terlibat dalam kajian ini. Data kajian dianalisis menggunakan ujian statistik. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa belia minoriti etnik melibatkan diri secara sederhana dalam politik Malaysia. Terdapat 47.7% responden yang berhasrat mengundi parti pemerintah dalam PRU-14 yang akan datang. Fenomena ini memberi kepentingan golongan belia etnik minoriti dalam membantu menyeimbangkan dan memulihkan sokongan terhadap parti pemerintah pada pilihan raya umum akan datang. Penyertaan politik belia etnik minoriti yang

kurang signifikan bukan sahaja dalam pengundian malah dalam proses demokrasi sehingga telah menjejaskan kemunduran pembangunan komuniti.

Kata Kunci : *Belia, Etnik Minoriti, Penglibatan Politik*

INTRODUCTION

It is undeniable that youths are the nations' future leaders. They are the driving force for the country's development and progress to be at par with the developed countries. As a first time voters, it is fascinating to study these young people because they are often considered as aggressive individuals especially when they seek for right information on certain matters. The young generation voters always seek for something which is relatively high in nature and eager to analyze information (Ahmad *et al.*, 2012). For instance in one of the state, Selangor, it was reported that almost 800,000 out of two million voters are below 40 years old and they are the youths (Utusan, 2012). Therefore, the young voters are the main capital changes of the nation for the next general election. The enormous number of youths in the country will impact on the coalitions to perform and convince the youths in order to secure their votes.

One of the most significant message from 2008 General Election was the involvement of youth which seemed to be explicitly against the concept of development brought by the government. The controversy had came to a conclusion when the ruling government lost the majority of two third parliamentary seats and five states to the opposition. Hence, this symbolizes a paradigm shift and trust of the young voters towards the new ruling government which is Pakatan Rakyat (PR).

The previous GE-12 showed an extraordinary transformation on the relationship between ethnic voting patterns and political parties. The Indian minority resentment towards Abdullah Badawi's leadership saw a substantial shift in the Indian's votes away from the ruling party in the 2008 general election. Traditionally, each ethnic group will give a strong support to the party that represents their ethnic interest. Somehow, the 2008 parliamentary election showed that the main ethnic groups, namely Malay, Chinese and Indian have supported the oppositions (Election Commission, 2008). On that account, how about the ethnic minority groups?

The political development which was found to be giving more focus on the ethnic majority youth has undermined the importance of minority youth in politics. Although nationally they are small in number, they are also an important segment of the population who possess the power in determining the winning of candidates in certain electoral areas especially in areas where they are concentrated.

Ethnic Minority

In the 19th. Century when British was ruling this country, they brought about diversity by bringing in a large numbers of the Indian and Chinese laborers to

the former Malay states. During this period, the British policy had lead to an emergence of a diversified community comprising of various ethnicities such as the Strait Chinese called Baba-Nyonya, the Portuguese, the Chitty and Sikh communities. The aborigines, the Orang Asli and the native Siamese existed alongside the new immigrants after the British rule.

Baba Nyonya is also commonly known as the ‘Peranakan Chinese’ or Straits Chinese. They are both the descendants of Chinese immigrants who had come to the Malay Archipelago and British Malaya (now Peninsular Malaysia and Singapore) between the 15th and 17th centuries. The Portuguese is the first colonial power to conquer Malaya, formerly known as ‘Tanah Melayu’ or Malay land in 1511 (Maruwiah, 2006). The landing of the Portuguese on the Malay land was synonym to the fall of the Malacca Islamic Sultanate sovereignty. From 1511 to the early 19th century, the historical records of Malacca revolves around the activities of the Portuguese and British colonialism (Khoo, 1979).

The Punjabi Sikh people who came to Malaysia play an important role in the military and transportation sectors. Hence, their movement was organized more in accordance to the needs of the colonial power (Pue & Charanjit, 2014). The history of the Chitty community started with the arrival of the Tamil traders from Panai in Tamil Nadu, India who settled down in early history of Melaka. Like the Straits Chinese, they too settled down in Melaka and freely intermingled with the local Malay and Chinese settlers (Yap Eng Moi, 1989).

The term ‘Orang Asli’ in Malay literally means “original people”, “natural people” or “aboriginal people”. They are the indigenous people of Peninsular Malaysia. Zawawi (1996) defined Orang Asli as one social category which was constructed by the post-colonial state, referring to one ethnic identity such as Malay, Chinese, Indian and others. The Orang Asli is the majority ethnic community in the social context of the minority ethnic communities, with an approximately population of 113,541 (Zalizan et al., 2009).

The term ‘Siam’ has been used in Malaysia as compared to ‘Thai’ due to the popularity of the term in the local context’. The Malaysian Siamese, a minority group consists of approximately 60,000 people who are living in the rural areas of the northern states of Kelantan, Perak, Kedah and Perlis adjoining the Thai border (Embong, 2001). The invasion of Kedah in November 1821 was a military operation mounted by the Kingdom of Siam against the Sultanate of Kedah in the area of what is now known as northern Malaysia. In 2014, there were nearly 70,000 people identified as “Siamese” or “Thai” holding Malaysian nationality.

Youth And Politics

The United Nations defines youths as individual in the age range of 15-24 years old while the Commonwealth defines youth as anyone between 15-29 years of age. However, the current Malaysia National Youth Development Policy (NYDP)

defines youths as individual in the age range from 15 to 40 years old. The Minister of Youths and Sports (Malaysia), Hon. Mr. Khairy Jamaludin will implement the new Malaysia Youth Policy (MYP) in 2018 with an amendments to the definition of youth to anyone between the age of 15 to 30 years as the essence of the changes and improvements, in line with the current needs of the youth (The Borneo Post, 2015).

Youth, commonly known as Generation Y are the country's asset and they are important for the continuity of the country's development and to uphold the sovereignty of the nation. According to the Electoral Commission statistics (2013), young voters in the range of 21 to 39 years old were 5,562,129 or 41.98% of the overall voters registered. Therefore, the young voters are the main capital changes of the nation for the next general election. The enormous number of youths in the country will impact on the coalitions to perform and convince the youths in order to secure their votes.

Majority of the youth will choose the political parties based on their values and benefits that they bring to the public. From the previous research, majority of the youth are more considerate and have open-minded view in choosing the political parties that will bring changes to the public and not based on race and religion (71%) compared to 14% who will choose parties based on religion and certain races, 11% (Jaharudin, 2014).

Commonwealth Secretariat defines the young people from 15 to 29 years old where they are still undergoing the transition period. During this transition period, one faces a stage from depending on others to someone who is independent which mainly involves mental activity like decision making. Compare to the previous elections, youth had been believing in ethnic based party when voting. However, the findings from a research show that majority of generation Y require changes in many aspects of life in the country (Ahmad et al., 2012). Hence, the credibility of an election candidate should be given priority instead of relying on the traditional beliefs factors like race and religious belief.

Malaysia's GE-13 on 5 May 2013 has been the closest-ever race since independence between Barisan Nasional (BN) and PR. A key group that is likely to have a significant influence on the outcome is the bloc of young voters who comprise 30% of the electorate (Osman, 2013). Hence, the coalition who can win the support of the youth is likely to have majority win in several frontline states and even form the next government in Putrajaya. This indicates that the youth has the power behind the throne in determining the future of Malaysian politics. The then election has become a turning point towards the ability of this group in term of intellectuality and ingenuity in translating their needs (Ahmad et al., 2012). The change of political development is also critical to be studied not only on the ethnic majority youth but also on the ethnic minority youth especially in the coming 14th General Election.

The studies of marginal politics is at its periphery especially in Malaysia. One of the most recent studies about marginal politics in Malaysia was conducted by Gill et al. (2016) on the perception and acceptance of the ethnic minority towards the ruling party in Malaysia. The findings of the study was found to be critical where there is a significant drop of support from 82.4% in the previous study in Gill et al. (2012) to 50.3%. Subsequently, it is very interesting to study the political participation of the minority youth who is an important bloc in Malaysia political development.

METHODOLOGY

A quantitative approach was adapted in this study using survey method. The survey was carried out using questionnaires adopted from previous research, Gill et al. (2016) on the “Perception and Acceptance of the Ethnic Minority Groups towards the Ruling Party in Malaysia”. There was 300 respondents from six ethnic minority groups in Peninsular Malaysia, namely the Baba Nyonya, Portuguese, Chitty, Sikh, Orang Asli and Siamese involved in this study. The researcher chose to use purposive sampling technique due to the reasons (1) the population size of each ethnic group are not well quantified (2) the scattered population of the ethnic minority communities as a number of them have moved to the city area for job opportunities. Hence, 300 respondents were sufficient to represent the six ethnic minority groups as it is difficult to proportionately select the respondents based on each ethnic group. The respondents were selected based on the age criteria ranging from 21-40 years old who qualified the voting eligibility. The study was carried out in three states, namely Malacca, Selangor and Kedah where these ethnic minority populations are found to be concentrated. The level of political participation was measured using voting status in GE-13, involvement in political parties and political activities while the support was evaluated from voting intention in GE-14. The survey data was analysed using descriptive analysis.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Profile of Respondents

A total of 300 respondents were involved comprised of 11.3% (34) respondents from the Baba Nyonya, 4.7% (14) from the Chitty, 12.7% (38) from the Portuguese, 36.7% (110) from the Orang Asli, 15.3% (46) from the Sikh, and 19.3% (58) from the Siamese minority groups. There were 58.7% (176) respondents in the age of 21-30 years old and 41.3% (124) respondents from 31-40 years old group.

Level of Political Participation

There were seven elements used to evaluate the level of political participation such as registration as voter, wearing a party badge or sticker, voting status in the previous General Election, discussions on community issues, discussions on political affairs, donations to political party, and donations to political leader. The seven elements was evaluated where a ‘Yes’ answer is given a score of ‘2’ and a ‘No’ answer is

given a score of '1'. Thus, the total score of the seven items ranged from 14 as the highest and 7 the lowest. The total score were then categorised into three levels; high, medium and low as shown in the Table 1 below.

Table 1: Level of Political Participation

Level (7 items)	(N=610)	(%)
High (Score: 7-8)	33	11.0
Medium (Score: 9-11)	185	61.7
Low (Score: 12-14)	82	27.3
Total	300	100

Based on the scores in Table 1 above, a majority of 61.7% of the respondents fell under the moderate level of involvement in political activities. Based on this result, it can be concluded that the ethnic minority youth had a moderate level of political participation in various political activities. As political participation is an important ingredient in any democratic system, those who failed to participate are less likely to get heard compare to others who participated. Nevertheless, this understanding is deficient among the ethnic minority youth as they do not fully understand and exercise their rights. Forbrig (2005) claimed that young people seems to show considerable reluctance to engage in conventional democratic politics which include involvement in only voting and campaigning. The new forms of social and political involvement emerge among them has represented a more fundamental transformation of contemporary democracy. Pandian (2014) explained that non-conventional forms of political participation which includes active involvement in protests, demonstrations may explain a certain degree of contributing factors in political activity.

Besides, this ethnic minority groups tend to see themselves not relevant to the dominant groups as they has been politically abandoned by the political leaders. They are inclined to perceive themselves to be insignificant in changing the government decision-making (Ramanathan, 2013). This can be supported by an open-opinion research conducted by the Merdeka Centre (2006) which evaluated that the youths' appreciation of democracy is somewhat limited where 8% feel that they can influence what government does. Though, they possess the right to participate in politic, but to what extend does the policy makers put their attention on the interest of this ethnic minority youth?

Level of Political Participation Based on Ethnic Groups

Table 2 below shows the level of political involvement among various ethnic groups. Generally, Majority of the respondents participated at the medium level in politics. Among the six ethnic groups, the Sikhs had the highest percentage of participation at about 78.3%, while the Orang Asli scored the least at 53.6%.

Table 2: Level of Political Participation Based on Ethnic Groups

Level/ Ethnic	High		Medium		Low		Total
	n	%	n	%	n	%	
Baba Nyonya	2	5.9	22	64.7	10	29.4	34(100%)
Chitty	1	7.1	9	64.3	4	28.6	14 (100%)
Portuguese	3	7.9	22	57.9	13	34.2	38 (100%)
Orang Asli	11	10.0	59	53.6	40	36.4	110 (100%)
Sikh	4	8.7	36	78.3	6	13.0	46 (100%)
Siamese	12	20.7	37	63.8	9	15.5	58 (100%)

Previous study had shown that the Sikh communities were facing various issues and that the Gurdwaras Management Committee (GMC) had turned this committee into a political platform (Gill & Kaur, 2008). This could have explained for the high level of Sikh political activism and why this community had scored the highest percentage in this category. On the other hand, the Orang Asli's participation seems to be the lowest as they are living in their traditional territories, regard themselves as separate and distinct group deserving of self-governing and sovereign from the dominant society (Nicholas, 2002).

Pattern of Political Support in Future Elections

Table 3 below shows how political support can be expected for the various political parties especially in the forthcoming general election that has to be held in 2018. Based on responses presented in Table 3 below, nearly half of the respondents will vote for the ruling party, the BN, 47.7% or 143 respondents will vote for BN.

Table 3: Anticipation Support for GE-14 (Parliament)

Party	(N = 610)	(%)
Barisan Nasional (BN)	143	47.7
Pakatan Harapan	96	32.0
PAS	9	3.0
Will not vote	52	17.3
Total	300	100

About 35.0% (105) respondents will vote for the opposition in the coming general elections. This projected support among various ethnic minority youth for BN in the coming general election is critical because it represents a slide in support as compared to the previous survey, Gill et al. (2012), showed that minority support for BN was at its highest at about 82.4%.

The result above is crucial for the ruling party to take proactive measures concerning issues of these ethnic minority youth. Although these ethnic minority groups are small in number, every single vote is important to determine a simple

majority for the ruling party to continue to succeed and returned to power.

Anticipation Support Based on Ethnic Groups

Table 4 below shows the anticipation support for 14th General Election based on ethnicity. These patterns are also based on in-depth discussions in Focus Group Discussion (FGD).

Table 4: Anticipation Support for GE-14 (Parliament) According to Ethnic

Party/Ethnic	BN	Pakatan Harapan	PAS	Will not Vote	Total
	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	
Baba Nyonya	3 (8.8)	20 (58.8)	1 (2.9)	10 (29.4)	34 (100%)
Chitty	6 (42.9)	5 (35.7)	-	3 (21.4)	14 (100%)
Portuguese	9 (23.7)	22 (57.9)	1 (2.6)	6 (15.8)	38 (100%)
Orang Asli	78 (70.9)	7 (6.4)	5 (4.5)	20 (18.2)	110 (100%)
Sikh	7 (15.2)	32 (69.6)	1 (2.2)	6 (13.0)	46 (100%)
Siamese	40 (69.0)	10 (17.2)	1 (1.7)	7 (12.1)	58 (100%)

BN will continue to gain its support from three minority communities, namely, from the Chitty respondents by about 42.9% (6), Siamese minorities by about 69% (40) and Orang Asli by about 70.9% (78). The results showed the other three ethnic minority groups, 57.9% (22) of the Portuguese respondents, 58.8% (20) of the Baba Nyonya respondents, and 69.6% (32) of the Sikh respondents intend to vote for PH in the next general elections.

This pattern of future support for the political parties in particular for the ruling party can be explained by the many unresolved issues that these ethnic minority groups continue to face. The Orang Asli's votes have often been given to the ruling BN, but their communal interest and rights continue to be neglected and exploited (Syed Husin Ali, 2001). There is the long standing, unresolved land rights issue as claimed by the Orang Asli.

In short, the FGD data had revealed the issues related to the ethnic minority groups (Portuguese, Chitty and Baba Nyonya) especially the preservation of their culture. Nevertheless, the cultures of these three minority communities have been exploited by the other party, Briged Seni. Evidently, the absence of local representative in engaging these communities yields to their continuous unresolved plights.. Though the ruling party often claimed concern for them, but these concerns have not been translated into actions with respect in addressing the proper needs of these communities.

CONCLUSION

The issue of community involvement in national politics is no longer a new matter. The moderate involvement of the ethnic minority youth in politics posed a crucial concern in enhancing the socio-development of these community. As political participation is an important ingredient in any democratic system, therefore it follows that those who fail to participate are less likely to get heard compare to others who participated.

The political veteran ought to give more opportunities to the younger generation to get involve in politics as the youth are envisioned as important assets for leading the national transformation in the future. It is important to emphasized that youth involvement under this political formula is not just for the majority youth groups but also calls for the involvement of the minority youth communities. Besides, it is equally important to call upon the minority youth in fostering unity with the majority youth communities in bringing about transformation in every general election, particularly in the upcoming GE-14, which t may take place at any time now.

In terms of support, a large proportion of this group intend to support the BN government in the next general election. However, the support of 47.7% from the ethnic minority youth is not convincing enough for the ruling party to root its supremacy particularly in certain constituency, highly concentrated minority areas. This showed that some of the ethnic minority groups who are considered by some scholars to be ‘fix deposits’ of the ruling BN may no longer display this in the coming general elections, except perhaps for the Orang Asli, Siamese and Chitty communities.

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