

# Young People’s Political Participation in Malaysia During the 1998 Reformasi Era

Norhafiza Mohd Hed

Department of Social Studies and Citizenship, Faculty of Human Sciences  
Sultan Idris Education University, Malaysia  
Email: norhafiza85 [AT] gmail.com

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**ABSTRACT**— *This article examines the dynamics of young people’s political participation in Malaysia during the 1998 Reformasi era by focusing its analyses on the patterns of participation and the impacts of the 1998 Reformasi and the 1999 general election on young people’s political engagement. By using content analysis of secondary data, the findings show that the 1998 Reformasi marked as a turning point that changed political engagement of young people from politically indifferent or disconnected generation to politically engaged citizens, whether in the forms of conventional politics (i.e. voting) or unconventional politics (i.e. protest activism and social movements) whilst failed to replace the existing ruling regime. This change was closely related to the regional trend, socioeconomic factors and the new media.*

**Keywords**— Young People, Political Participation, the 1998 Reformasi, Conventional Politics, Unconventional Politics

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In Malaysia, although elections are held regularly every five years with highly competitive political parties, due to the repressive controls by the government, citizens have very limited political rights and freedoms. The ethnic riots of 1969 prompted the Malaysian government to enact draconian laws such as the Sedition Act 1948, the Internal Security Act 1960 (replaced by Security Offences (Special Measures) Act 2012) and the Universities Colleges Act 1971. Through these laws, students were no longer allowed to be members of, or show support for, any political parties or to be involved in many off-campus activities. It is not a surprise then that, Malaysian youth are apathetic with respect to politics. However, the nature of youth political engagement in Malaysia has changed dramatically over the last decade. This change was apparent during the ‘reformation’ era that witnessed remarkable emergence of young people engaging in Malaysian politics. The participation of young voters exploded during this period which began with the dismissal of a former Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim from the government in 1998. Anwar, who lost his political power, launched the so-called the *Reformasi* movement which supported by a large member of the public, mainly young people to fight against the Mahathir’s regime. Therefore, this article argues that the reformation era of 1998 is critical to be explored as it provides palpable changing in the patterns of youth political participation in Malaysia by addressing some of the key issues: What are the patterns of youth political participation during the *Reformasi* era? Are there any changes in youth political participation during this era? If yes, what are the factors influencing these changes? And what are the impacts of the *Reformasi* movement on youth political participation in Malaysia? To address these questions, we used qualitative approach, mainly the content analyses to discuss theoretical underpinning stem from the concept of political participation, exploring the historical background of the *Reformasi* and the 1999 general election. We conclude this article by analysing why many young people engaged in politics during this era and what are the impacts of the *Reformasi* movement on youth political engagement.

## 2. POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Most literature on political participation always derived from the assessment of the practice of democracy (Van Deth 2014), rather than authoritarian system. Political participation can be understood as “... those activities by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of governmental personnel and/or the actions they take” (Verba and Nie 1972). In other words, political participation refers to citizens’ actions to influence political decisions. There are varieties of available actions for political participation, whether conventional (e.g., voting, party membership) and unconventional (e.g., protesting, boycotting, signing petitions, and social movements) forms of participation. However, over the past few decades, a number of established Western democracies have experienced a decline of youth political participation, not only in voter turnout and membership of political parties (Clarke *et al.* 2004; Sloam 2007), but also a decreasing in civic life (Putnam 2000). Instead, more and more young people especially, are seen to be engaged in grassroots movements that campaigning for a single-issue such as environmentalism, immigration etc. The emergence of

these new channels of participation has crosscutting the traditional left-right spectrums and weaken the old-style politics. As a result of ‘the participation paradox’, emerge two rival camps. The first camp is those who strongly hold on the hypothesis of youth apathy—young people are totally disengaged from politics, including voting, organizational membership and civic life (Kimberlee 2002). The second group belongs to the ‘anti-apaty’ school, who believe that young people are engaged in politics, but they shift to ‘unconventional or ‘elite-challenging’ forms of political participation, such as protests, strikes and boycotts (Norris 2002; Henn *et al.* 2002; Sloam 2007). As the prospects and actions in the realm of politics have developed and broadened, it is necessary to reconceptualise political participation to include new repertoires outside the mainstream politics in understanding youth participation. In relation to this, the article follows the ‘anti-apaty’ thesis by arguing that young people during the *Reformasi* era actively participated in politics whether in both conventional and unconventional forms of participation.

### 3. THE *REFORMASI* 1998: A BRIEF BACKGROUND

The political crisis of Anwar-Mahathir could be traced back from the Asian economic crisis in 1997, after the collapsed of Thai Baht. This crisis began swiftly widespread through the entire Southeast Asian and smashed the economy of ‘Asian Economic Tigers’, including Malaysia and Indonesia which caused these countries to face severe economic downturn. Like the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Anwar believed that this crisis happened due to the internal factors—inefficient financial management and the rampant practices of corruptions and money politics in the government. Anwar, who was also the Finance Minister during the time, tried to find a way out by tightening the fiscal through the IMF approach known as ‘homegrown IMF program without the IMF’. However, Anwar’s led policy caused problems to a number of companies and banks, and the values of Malaysian currency dropped sharply from RM 2.47 (US \$1) in July 1997 to RM 4.88 (US\$1) in January 1998 (Jomo 1998:181). The failure of this policy was highly criticised by Mahathir. Mahathir regarded this IMF policy as a form of re-colonisation of Western capitalists to dominate the country through the economic globalisation (Rustam Sani 1998:72). Instead, Mahathir announced a new formula—without the help of the IMF—by introducing capital control and fixed foreign exchange rate. Therefore, he set-up a National Economic Action Council (NEAC) in January 1998 and appointed the former Finance Minister, Daim Zainuddin as the executive director. This appointment was seen as an initial strategy for Mahathir to limit the power of Anwar as the Finance Minister (Hwang 2003:296).

As a result, Mahathir-Anwar relationship worsened, particularly when one of Anwar’s loyal supporters and UMNO Youth leader, Zahid Hamidi openly condemned the government’s practice of cronyism, nepotism and corruption during the 1998 UMNO General Assembly (Khoo Boo Teik 2003:80). The Prime Minister responded by publishing a list of all recipients of government tenders, including Anwar’s cronies and family members (Pandian 2005a:327). Mahathir’s supporters also distributed a brochure accusing Anwar’s conspiracy to overthrow Mahathir and of his sexual offences. Across the borders, the financial crisis was a turning point for the leadership’s change in Thailand, Philippines and Indonesia. In Indonesia, for example, the crisis had resulted in the downfall of president Suharto by popular uprising. Mahathir’s feared of losing power as Suharto, sacked Anwar from the Cabinet on 2 September 1998, following the allegations of sexual misconduct. Anwar insisted that he was a victim of high-level political conspiracy plotted by Mahathir, to stop him from disclosing corruptions within the government (Trowell 2012:63). In contrast, Mahathir claimed that Anwar’s dismissal was nothing to do with the disagreements over economic policies or leadership challenge by Anwar, caused by Anwar’s indulgence in improper sexual activities.

What was the reaction of the people, especially the youngsters in relation to Anwar’s dismissal? The public response was immediate. Young people, particularly the Malays, viewed Anwar’s purge from the government by Mahathir as contradicting with the Malay cultural values and sensitivities (Hilley 2008; Pandian 2005a). More importantly, Anwar was perceived as an ‘idol’ for young Malays as he strongly defended the idea of Malay nationalism in matters related to Islam and Malay language and seemed to be more populist than Mahathir. Thus, he easily gained broad national support. The wide-ranging support that Anwar received from the ordinary masses led him to launch a *Reformasi* agenda in the *Permatang Pauh* declaration on 12 September 1998 to surge anti-Mahathir sentiments. This movement echoed Indonesia’s anti-Suharto movement called to eliminate the practice of “kolusi, korupsi and nepotisme” (collusion, corruption and nepotism) (Khoo Boo Teik 2003). The *Reformasi* movement was staged in two different phases: The *Reformasi* through random street demonstrations; and the *Reformasi* through the social media. This made easier for Anwar to mobilise support and formulate an effective strategy against the government.

In the first phase, Anwar began to garner mass supports of the *Reformasi* movement—from the opposition parties, NGOs, and the publics, including young people and university students (Weiss 2006; Khoo Boo Teik 2003). Those who were sympathetic to Anwar held a series of mass rally protesting over his dismissal and called for the prime minister’s resignation. The street protest reached its peak in the midst of the 16<sup>th</sup> Commonwealth Games and Queen Elizabeth’s visit to Kuala Lumpur on 20 September 1998, with a rally of more than 30,000 people precipitated by Anwar through the streets of Kuala Lumpur. This mass protest received worldwide coverage in international media, including BBC filmed some of the disturbances. Anwar successfully utilised this event to spread the message of *Reformasi* to the people outside Malaysia (Khoo Boo Teik 2003). Whilst this movement failed to remove Mahathir from power, the *Reformasi* had seriously tarnished Mahathir’s image and reputation, locally and abroad.

Immediately after the rally, he was arrested under the dreaded ISA (Hilley 2008:169). Anwar's close associates such as Kamaruddin Jaffar, Zahid Hamidi and Ruslan Kassim were also dragged into the ISA detention (Tan Lee Ooi 2010:55). Anwar's arrest provoked more large-scale protests in the city, demanded the release of Anwar. Anwar was found guilty on four charges of corruption and was sentenced to six years imprisonment. When the verdicts were delivered, Anwar's supporters gathered outside the court to protest against an unfair trial of Anwar. However, this rally or so-called as 'Black 14' (in conjunction with the date of Anwar's verdict) lasted for three days and turned violent as they had clashed with the police. To prevent more people from participating in pro-Anwar rally, the government used the ISA to create a 'culture of fear' and arrested many of the protesters. Perhaps, this showed the extent to which Mahathir was willing to do anything to serve his political objectives. In response to Anwar's arrest and the government's crackdown on the *Reformasi* supporters, two new major movements were established, led by the opposition parties and influential NGOs which cut across the ethnic lines: the Malaysian People's Movement for Justice (Gerak) led by Fadzil Noor from PAS, and the Coalition for People's Democracy (Gagasan) headed by Tian Chua from the Suaram, with the objective to oppose injustice practices in Mahathir's regime (Saliha and Lopez 2005:124). The formation of these movements showed that differences in ideology, religions and ethnicity were no longer a major obstacle to form a partnership in an effort to strengthen democracy in Malaysia. Despite of similar membership components, the main agendas and activities of these two movements were totally separated but mutually supported each other (Hwang 2003:314). Although Gerak and Gagasan had no formal connection with the *Reformasi* movement, they expressed their sympathy by actively participated in street demonstrations, demanded justice for Anwar and helped to promote anti-Mahathir sentiment.

Meanwhile, another interesting impact of the *Reformasi* movement was the establishment of 'Movement for Social Justice' (Adil), led by Anwar's wife, Wan Azizah and Chandra Muzafar, in an effort to formalise the *Reformasi* into a more concrete organisational structure. On 4 April 1999, this movement was transformed into a strong multiracial political party known as 'National Justice Party' or KeADILan. This party attracted more than 200,000 members, mostly young people (Weiss 2006:152). KeAdilan was seemed as the viable alternative to the young-urban based Malays and Chinese (Hwang 2003:356). It captured the heart of young people as this party was born from the *Reformasi*, it was not a race-based political party and strongly addressed the issues related to the interests of the youth such as good governance, social justice and human rights. The formation of KeADILan opened an opportunity to build a broad opposition political alliance (Hilley 2008).

On 2 July 1999, for the first time, KeADILan, PAS, DAP and PRM forged a political alliance that mirrored the government's own, known as the *Barisan Alternatif* (BA or Alternative Front). The importance of this coalition was the attempt to call across racial boundaries. Prior to the 1999 General election, BA also formed an electoral pact—only one candidate contested in each constituency and launched a joint manifesto. To spread the political agenda to the supporters, BA used its own alternative media—the newspapers and the Internet—as the mainstream media was strictly controlled by BN. Each component parties had its own official newspaper, *Harakah Daily* (owned by PAS), *Keadilan* (owned by KeADILan), and *The Rocket* (owned by the DAP). Whilst many of the pro-opposition publications were curbed by the government as purportedly for publishing a seditious libel, the BA and *Reformasi* groups shifted their attention to the Internet (Gomez and Chang, 2014:184). The Internet played a crucial role as it became a major channel for BA to mobilise its supports and gathered *Reformasi*-related information (Mohd Azizuddin 2009). It was at this time, the second phase of the *Reformasi* emerged, where the Internet was politicised, and perhaps gave rise to the young Malaysians 'Internet generation'.

It was notable that the *Reformasi* had utilised the potential of the internet, by transforming it into a new repertoire of contention, as it was free from the government censorship. Immediately after Anwar was arrested, pro-Anwar and *Reformasi* websites such as *Anwar Online*, *Reformasi Diary* and *Free Malaysia* grew tremendously. These websites gained popularity among the public who lost trust with the government media. As the *Reformasi* movement was abated, many of the *Reformasi*-related websites were no longer operated. Only influential online news like *Malaysiakini* remained as a pro-opposition news website which allowed free flow of information, enabled public discussion and favourably received by young people. Since 1998, the Internet users in Malaysia boomed significantly from 6.7 percent to 67.5 percent in 2014, with its netizen's population getting almost 20.1 million in 2014 and it has been estimated that more than 80 percent of these users were young people below 30 years.<sup>1</sup>

There were several factors why young Malaysians, mainly the supporters of the *Reformasi*, at that time, more interested in using the Internet. First, the Internet offered more spaces for the youth to voice out their views, ideas and criticisms towards the government, as it was controlled by the people and could be a 'check and balance' for the government's mainstream media. Second, the new media was hassle-free and provided relatively cost-effective means of communication. Third, it was due to the factor of 'global trend'—many developed countries like the United States and Britain had long been using the new media for political activism. For example, the 1997 British general election indicated as the 'first internet election' that saw many political parties used the ICTs to reach out the voters (Ward and Gibson, 1998:3). The development of cyber culture in other countries, thus influenced young Malaysians to explore this new space. Indeed, the *Reformasi* and Anwar himself was attributed as the catalyst of online dissents in Malaysia (Vee, in Leong 2016:160), as they shaped the political consciousness among young people to fight against the Mahathir's regime.

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.internetlivestats.com/internet-users/malaysia/> [Accessed on 9 June 2017]

#### 4. YOUNG PEOPLE AND THE 1999 GENERAL ELECTION

Evidence of the disenchantment with Mahathir's regime could be clearly seen in the 1999 general election. As a support for political reform and disappointment over the country's financial crisis, many young people went to the polls in the 1999 General Election as the percentage of registered young voters increased from 80.9 percent in 1980, to 89.4 percent in 1998 (Election Commission of Malaysia, 2002). In addition, with the help of technological advancement such as social media and mobile phone, youth has another channel to access political news and express their concerns on public issues faster and more convenient than before (De Vreese, 2007). This election witnessed an intense competition between the BN and BA, in which both contested parties had an equal opportunity to win the election. The political unrest caused by Anwar's dismissal and the *Reformasi* movement had resulted a dismal to the BN, particularly UMNO. Although BN retained its two-thirds majority in Parliament with 148 out of the 193 seats (a drop of 10% popular votes), but UMNO, the kingpin in the BN, lost more than half of the Malay votes and failed to secure half of the total number of seats won by the BN. UMNO won only 72 out of the 148 seats, compared with 89 seats in the 1995 general election (Weiss 2000:414). UMNO's heavyweight candidates, mainly ministers and deputy ministers were also defeated and faced severe erosion of the Malay supports in many Malay-majority constituencies. This showed that UMNO had lost its legitimacy as the defender of the Malays. Despite of the Anwar issue, the BN campaign on the politics of developmentalism—emphasised heavily on BN's track record was no longer relevant to young people as most of them were born in the post-NEP era, where physical infrastructure and economic security had been provided by the government. Instead, they were attracted to the issues of justice, good governance, more democratic spaces and human rights, and felt that these issues need to be taken seriously by the government. Therefore, they rejected BN, and realised the congruent of their own interests with what the *Reformasi* and BA were fighting for. The 1999 general election, thus marked as the significant change in attitudes and perceptions of young people towards BN.

On the other hand, this election saw the opposition (BA) made an unprecedented achievement, with PAS appeared as the biggest winner. Malay's dissatisfaction over the issue of dismissal and incarceration of Anwar Ibrahim had benefited PAS in the election. PAS, not only retained its control of Kelantan, but also defeated UMNO in Terengganu and had successfully increased its parliamentary seats from 7 seats in the 1995 election, to 27 seats. Many Malays, mostly young and educated professionals switched their support to PAS to show their discontent with the political and economic development which had rocked the country (Hiebert 1998). This showed that PAS strategy to put aside the Islamic state agenda during campaigning and its effort to cooperate with DAP did not lead to the loss of support from the Muslim electorates. Whereas, the KeADILan as a newly-formed party also performed at par with well-established parties (Weiss 2000). They won five parliamentary seats, with 11.5 percent of the popular votes mainly in the urban areas of Kuala Lumpur and Selangor. This indicated that KeADILan and Anwar was strongly supported by the urban-middle-class electorate.

Not all component parties in the BA achieved an excellent performance in this election. This was reflected in the poor performance of DAP when this party only managed to add only a seat in this election, made the total number of seats won by DAP was 10, and captured slightly more popular votes (12.5 percent). DAP also failed to take over Penang state, and their prominent leaders, both Karpal Singh and Lim Kit Siang faced very poor defeats in this election. There were significant number of young Chinese who were sympathetic to Anwar, but in the end, they gave their votes to Mahathir and BN as they feared the DAP-PAS collaboration would transform Malaysia into an Islamic state. However, after the 1999 general election, PAS and DAP were trapped in a serious ideological conflict, when PAS expressed publicly their intention and commitment to establish an Islamic State in Kelantan and Terengganu. After both parties were unable to achieve an agreement on this issue, DAP took a decision to withdraw from the BA as a strategy to gain back the confidence of the Chinese electorate.

For UMNO, their poor performance and a substantial erosion of support among the Malays were a wake-up call for the party. Many UMNO leaders acknowledged that there was a need for fundamental reforms in UMNO and it was time to listen to its voters, in order to regain the support of the Malays, especially younger voters. However, Mahathir refused to make any reforms or policy changes in UMNO. Instead, he imposed repressive measures to restrict the opposition. For example, PAS official newspaper, *Harakah* was allowed to be published only twice a month instead of twice a week, and many of the pro-opposition publications were shut down. Whilst many moves made by Mahathir to weaken PAS, PAS remained a formidable threat to the UMNO as PAS had dominated the Malay heartland. The political war between UMNO-PAS further boosted anti-Mahathir sentiments among the Malays, mostly young people and they highly demanded him to step down. Therefore, on October 31, 2003, Mahathir decided to retire from the public office after holding the post for 22 years, passing the premiership to his chosen successor, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

#### 5. SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

Based on the discussion above, there are several key findings that can be highlighted. The *Reformasi* era was not only a political clash between two de facto leaders, Mahathir versus Anwar, but it was marked as a turning point that significantly changed the Malaysian politics, specifically at the level of young people's political participation. It witnessed the upsurge of young people, who had been indifferent to politics, were involved in the vanguard of the *Reformasi* movement fought

against the existing *status quo*. For instance, there were generally 680,000 new registrants, presumed to be the *Reformasi* supporters were unable to cast their votes as their names did not appear on the electoral rolls. The new registered voters at that time shot up three times higher than the usual number of new voters, many probably were motivated by the *Reformasi* (Weiss 2000:421). Thus, it can be seen that the patterns of youth political participation during the *Reformasi* era changed from politically indifferent or disconnected generation to politically engaged citizens, and multi-dimensional in nature where they participated actively in both conventional and unconventional politics, ranging from social movement—demonstrations—online activism— and voting in elections.

Notably, there were several factors why young people interested to involve in politics during this reformation era. First, the awareness to engage in politics was driven by the factor of ‘regional trends’. In particular, economic depression had steered massive protests in Thailand and Indonesia, which in turn led to the collapse of the existing premierships. Malaysia also could not escape from this trend as the widespread discontent towards the Mahathir’s regime brought many young people onto the streets of Kuala Lumpur. However, the massive protests in Malaysia, compared to Thailand and Indonesia, failed to topple down Mahathir as he succeeded in handling economic crisis and used despotic laws to repress protesters, including Anwar’s incarceration. Second, the economic woes, corruption and impeachment of Anwar had drawn young people’s attention to reforming the political system and economy, guided by democratic principles such as freedom, justice and transparency. Lastly, ‘the cyber media factor’ plays a pivotal role in enhancing political participation of the Malaysian youth, as online platforms simply facilitated direct interactions between them and political actors, providing vast political information and free from the government’s control.

Whilst the *Reformasi* failed to overthrow Mahathir from his premiership, there were several long-term ramifications of this movement. First, this movement had shaped citizen’s political awareness and galvanised mass youth participation in the whole spectrum of participation, including conventional and unconventional forms of political participation. Therefore, political activism continued to evolve at the highest level even the *Reformasi* movement was no longer existed (Weiss 2006). Second, the *Reformasi* provided a platform that bridged political parties and civil society and adjoined the opposition parties against the regime. To some extent, it sowed the seeds for greater electoral challenges when the political opportunity structure was in favor of the opposition as what happened in the 2008 general election (Liu 2014:44). Moreover, the *Reformasi* was successfully stirred the idea of ‘new politics’ as the issues brought forward by this movement were beyond ethnic lines—fought for civil liberties, human rights, good governance, more democratic space, and corruption, that indirectly encouraged young Malaysians to abandon ethnic allegiance. Last but not least, as the movement extensively engaged the public on universal issues, it has contributed to the emergence of new idealism and culture among the youth. In particular, a handful young people created so called ‘independent group’ such as *Komuniti Seni Jalan Telawi* (KsJT) and *Universiti Bangsar Utama* (UBU), which were actively organised community-based programs, educational street theatre and agitprop to influence and mobilised youth to struggle for democratic reforms.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This article discusses a comprehensive background of youth political participation during the *Reformasi* 1998, by arguing that this era was a turning point that change the nature of youth political participation as it saw a remarkable increased of young people in political activism, particularly after the dismissal of Anwar Ibrahim from the government, and youth continued to play a crucial role in determining the electoral outcome of the 1999. Although some argue that the *Reformasi* movement failed to create structural changes in politics (Nair, 2007), but since the emergence of this movement, there has been an overwhelming support for democracy among large numbers of young people in Malaysia. Their political awareness has increased tremendously, and they urged for political change—respecting the civil rights of citizens and eradication of money politics and corruption among politicians.

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