

2d: Youth

Preamble

This policy area is rooted in a firm belief and hope for the young hearts of the nation as the leaders of tomorrow. It is focused on creating an enabling environment for Malaysian youth to achieve greater political representation, after many decades of being under-represented in political institutions. At the same time, this policy area also advocates for educational reforms to help increase political awareness among the youth and encourage them to think critically and independently about cultures, ideologies and political issues, by equipping them with an understanding of politics and the political process through formal education.

As the country's future heirs, young people are directly affected by the political decisions and actions taken in Parliament, both in terms of the allocation and distribution of national resources, and how well these resources are developed sustainably. It may be argued that the youth, more so than older politicians, have a greater stake in policymaking, since they have more time and will be present to see the absolute effects of these policies take root in their future years. It is therefore imperative for young people to have a stronger presence in government and be involved in social and economic policymaking, in order to ensure that the present generation's needs are met without compromising the well-being of future generations.

I: Youth Political Participation

In Malaysia, youth political engagement is severely curtailed by the UUCA. Section 15 of UUCA, which was enforced at the height of youth activism in 1975, prohibits students from becoming members of political groups and taking part in political party activities on-campus. These prohibitions are reinforced by Section 16, which grants power to the vice-chancellor to take internal disciplinary action against students found to be involved in political activities. Those who dare to challenge the law and express critical perspectives are commonly faced

with harsh penalties, including suspension or expulsion by the university authorities.

UUCA's restrictive provisions prevent the youth from acting and engaging in the political process. Indirectly, this has led to age discrimination in the political environment. In 2019, Malaysia's youth representation in parliament stood at a mere 12% from a pool of 222 members of Parliament (MPs), whereas the rest of the world averaged a youth representation of 14.2%. This share has barely risen since then, which is a cause of concern. The low participation rate of youth in politics may be a significant reason as to why most older politicians have continued to dominate the political landscape despite having served for long periods, some up to decades. As of 2018, the median age of Malaysian MPs was 55.5 years, reflecting a disproportionate share in age representation skewed towards middle-aged to senior political actors. The political landscape will grow increasingly stagnant if the same voices linger on instead of making way for younger cohorts of political actors.

1. Repeal UUCA and replace it with a more comprehensive law to restore academic freedoms.

The new law should enshrine the institutional and legal grounds for youth to fully express their political rights.

(Liau Pin Chun, University of Malaya New Youth (UMANY), Proposal 2D-1 & Policy Town Hall Meeting)

2. Amend laws such as the Election Offences Act 1954 to lower candidate age requirements and impose age-related quotas to increase the share of younger candidates.

Such provisions will help increase the presence of younger politicians in parliament, and reduce the dominant presence of middle-aged to elderly politicians, thus shifting the political landscape towards a more balanced composition.

(Lew Guan Xi, Proposal 2D-2)

II: Political Literacy

In order to prepare young people to fulfil their role as adult citizens in a democracy, it is crucial to equip them from an early stage with knowledge and understanding of politics and how to participate in the political process. Schools are an important platform for them to access resources needed to be politically literate.

Unfortunately, political literacy is an aspect that has been glaringly overlooked in our formal education system for several decades. The current syllabus, which focuses more on political history than the fundamental aspects of a democratic society, does little to cultivate political awareness, nor does it train students to think critically and independently about political and social issues. It is almost as if politics is a taboo topic and something that should not be discussed within the realm of education.

3. Incorporate political literacy into the national education curriculum.

(Lew Guan Xi, Proposal 2D-2)

At the time of writing, “Undi 18”, i.e., the proposal for automatic voter registration and lowering of eligible age to contest in elections, has been gazetted by Parliament and come into force, paving the way for an estimated five million youths to be registered as first-time voters on the electoral list by the next general election. To prepare these youth to begin their engagement with the political process, the national public school syllabus should be revamped to increase greater political awareness among the youth.

- i. In the short term, the Education Ministry could expand and improve the existing history and civic studies syllabuses to become more hands-on, practical resources for political literacy. Education providers should focus on creating more avenues for students to freely debate and engage with political issues and narratives.
- ii. Longer-term reforms should involve developing a comprehensive “citizenship” syllabus that is taught to students in a critical and balanced manner that allows youth to form their own opinions, including critiquing, questioning and challenging the leadership of the day.

Concluding Remarks

In a country where nearly 30% of the population comprises youth (15–30 years old), representation from young politicians is crucial in order to galvanise policies that respond to the specific needs of the younger generation. Moreover, the youth are the future leaders and a beacon of hope in a conflicting and fractured political landscape. Their voices must be heard and adequately represented in elected assemblies, to refute old and tired ideologies and to keep a staid or faulty leadership on its toes.

This policy reform proposal calls for the strengthening of youth political participation and parliamentary presence towards an effective government. It supports the empowerment of youth's political rights through the attainment of systematic reforms such as the repeal of suppressive laws and a well-planned civic education that empowers, educates and prepares students to emerge as open-minded, progressive young adults, capable of lending their voices and perspectives to political issues that bear direct meaning and relevance for their own lives.