The Youth of Ethnic Minority And Political Participation in Peninsular Malaysia

**Belia Etnik Minoriti dan Penglibatan Politik di Semenanjung Malaysia**

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**ABSTRACT**
This paper aims to present the political participation of six ethnic minority’s youth namely the Baba Nyonya, Portuguese, Chitty, Sikh, Orang Asli, and Siamese in Peninsular Malaysia. The political study that dominantly focused on the ethnic majority called for a crucial study on the ethnic minority in explaining their social inequality faced. Though these ethnic minority groups are small in number, they are also an important bloc in some electoral areas where they are highly populated. In such area, they are the “king maker” when there is a tight competition between two competing parties. A quantitative research approach has been employed by using a survey method. A total of 300 respondents from the six ethnic minority groups ranging from the age 21–40 years old were involved in this study. The survey data was analyzed using statistical test. The findings showed that the ethnic minority youth participate moderately in Malaysian politics. There was about 47.7% of the respondents intend to vote for the ruling party in the next GE-14. This scenario implies some serious attention on the fragility of the support of the minority youths. Hence the ethnic minority youth are important to restore and balance the lost support by the ruling party in the coming general election. The insignificant participation of these ethnic minority youth in voting and other democratic processes has socially disadvantaged their community development.

**Keywords:** youth, ethnic minority, political participation

**ABSTRAK**
Makalah ini bertujuan membentangkan mengenai penyertaan politik belia etnik minoriti khususnya Baba Nyonya, Portugis, Chetti, Sikh, Orang Asli, dan Siam di Malaysia. Kajian politik yang seringkali memberi tumpuan kepada etnik majoriti memberi perhatian kepada kepentingan kajian etnik minoriti yang sering kali menghadapi masalah ketidaksamaan sosial. Walaupun bilangan etnik minoriti adalah kecil, mereka juga satu blok penting di beberapa kawasan parlimen yang padat dihuni oleh golongan etnik minoriti. Di kawasan tersebut, 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. Dapatkan 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 menunjukkan golongan belia etnik minoriti mempunyai kepentingan 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 sedikit sebanyak telah menjejaskan pembangunan komuniti.

**Kata Kunci:** belia, etnik minoriti, penglibatan politik
Introduction

Youths in Malaysia constitutes a large segment, 43% of the total population in Malaysia (Leong, Azhar, Hazri, & Mulakala, 2012). Hence, it is undeniable that they are the driving force of one’s nation future development. Youth are a fascinating subject to be studied as they are the first time voters who often considered as an aggressive individual in looking up for right information related to certain matters. The generation voters always seek for something which relatively high in nature and eager to analyze information (Ahmad, Embong, Noor, & Abdur-Rahman, 2012). In Selangor, for instance, almost 800,000 out of two million voters are below 40 years old which 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 ruling coalitions to perform and convince the youths in order to secure their votes.

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

The past 12th General Election showed extraordinary transformation among the relationship between ethnic voting patterns and political parties. The Indian minority resentment towards Abdullah Badawi leadership saw substantial shift in Indian votes away from the ruling party in the 2008 general elections. Traditionally, each ethnic group will give strong support to the party that represents their ethnic interest. The ruling party, Barisan Nasional (BN) which always claimed to represent each ethnic groups had slashed off from winning two-third in the last two GE-12 and GE-13. Somehow, the 2008 parliamentary elections showed that the largest ethnic group such as Malay, Chinese and Indians had swung their support for the alliance of oppositions (Election Commission, 2008). On that account, how about the ethnic minority groups which includes the Orang Asli, Portuguese, Chitty, Siamese, Sikh and Baba Nyonya? Are these groups of ethnic minority well represented by the current ruling party?
Ethnic Minority

During their rule, the British brought about diversity by importing large numbers of Indian and Chinese laborers to the former Malay states during the 19th century. Over their rule, this British policy had led to the emergence of a diversified community comprising 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 thus has long existed alongside before the British occupation.

The 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 at that time. From 1511 to the early 19th century, the historical records of Malacca revolved 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 the Chitty community started with the coming of 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 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 heads (Zalizan, Abdul Razaq & Ahmad Rafaai., 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 rural portions 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 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 country is in the age range of 16-24 years old. However, the current National Youth Development Policy (NYDP) in Malaysia defines youths as individual in the age range from 15 to 40 years old. The Minister of Youths and Sports (Malaysia), Khairy Jamaludin will implement the new Malaysia Youth Policy (MYP) in 2018 with the amendments to the definition of youth aged 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 the Generation Y who are the country’s assets are important for continuous country’s development and uphold the dignity 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 races and religions (71%) compared to 14% will choose parties based on religions and certain races, 11% (Jaharudin, 2014).

Commonwealth Secretariat, defines the young people from 15 to 29 years old where they are still undergo transition period. During this transition state, 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 most generation Y requires 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 National (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 that can win the support of the youth is likely to win majority in several frontline states and even form the next government in Putrajaya. This indicates that the youth has the power behind the throne in determine the future of Malaysian politics. From that understanding, election has become a turning point towards the ability of this group in term of intellectuality and ingenuity 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, Talib, Harun, Choo, & Fang, (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 on the political participation of the minority youth who also play an important bloc in Malaysia political development.

**Methodology**

A quantitative approach was employed in this study using survey method. The survey was carried out using questionnaire 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 the six ethnic minority groups in Peninsular Malaysia, namely the Baba Nyonya, Portuguese, Chitty, Sikh, Orang Asli dan Siamese involved in this study. The researcher selected only 300 samples due to the population size of each ethnic groups are not well quantified and the scattered population of the ethnic minority
communities. The respondents were selected based on the criteria of age ranging from 21-40 years old who qualify voting eligibility. The study was carried out in three states, namely Malacca, Selangor and Kedah where these ethnic minority population are found to be concentrated. The level of political participation was measured using voting status in GE-13, involvement in political party 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 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.

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 last General Election, discussion on community issues, discussion on political affairs, donation to political party, and donation 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 of the respondents were then categorised into three levels; high, medium and low as shown in the Table 1 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level (7 items)</th>
<th>(N=300)</th>
<th>(%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>High</strong> (Score: 12-14)</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>11.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Medium</strong> (Score: 9-11)</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>61.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Low</strong>  (Score: 7-8)</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>27.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>300</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Fieldwork 2015

Based on the scores in Table 1 above, a majority of about 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, it therefore follows that those who fail to participate are less likely to get
heard compare to others who participate. 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. So they
intend to perceived 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 Center (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 polity, but to what extend 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 the various ethnic groups.
Generally, the majority of all 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>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level/ Ethnic</th>
<th>High</th>
<th></th>
<th>Medium</th>
<th></th>
<th>Low</th>
<th></th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baba Nyonya</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>64.7</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>29.4</td>
<td>34(100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chitty</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>64.3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>28.6</td>
<td>14 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portuguese</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>57.9</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>34.2</td>
<td>38 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orang Asli</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>53.6</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>36.4</td>
<td>110 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sikh</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>78.3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>46 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Siamese</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>20.7</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>63.8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>15.5</td>
<td>58 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Fieldwork 2015
The Sikh communities have been actively participating in political activities. 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>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>(N = 610)</th>
<th>(%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Barisan Nasional (BN)</td>
<td>143</td>
<td>47.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pakatan Harapan</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>32.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PAS</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Will not vote</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>17.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>300</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Fieldwork 2015

About 35.0% (105) respondents will vote for the opposition in the coming general elections. This projected support among the various ethnic minority youth for BN in the coming general election is critical because this represented a slide in support as compared to a previous survey, Gill et al. (2012), showed that minority support for BN was at its high 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, but every single vote is important to determine a simple majority for the ruling party to continue to succeed and be 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 can be explained based on in-depth discussion from the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) conducted.

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

Source: Fieldwork 2015

The 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, 69.6% (32) of the Sikh respondents intended to vote for PH in the next general elections.

This pattern of future support for the political parties and in particular for the ruling party can be explained by various unresolved issues that they continuously faced. 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 Focus Group Discussion data had revealed the issues related of 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 Seni1. Evidently, the absence of the local representative

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1 Briged Seni Melaka or in English can be pronounced as Melaka Art Brigade is an official cultural dance and music performing group for the State Government of Melaka. Performance by the troupe is choreographing for all aspect of Malaysian multi-racial community especially in Melaka that consist of Chinese, Indian, Baba Nyonya, Chitty and Portuguese.
in engaging these communities yields to the continuous unresolved plights of these communities. Though the ruling party often claimed to 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 pose a crucial concern in enhancing the socio-development of these community. As political participation is an important ingredient in any democratic system, it therefore follows that those who fail to participate are less likely to get heard compare to others who participate. My concern is that to what extent does the majority group be inclusive in involving the ethnic minority groups in polity?

Furthermore, the political veteran ought to give more rooms to the younger generation to 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 transformation in every general election, particularly in the upcoming GE-14, that is just around the corner.

In terms of support, a large proportion of them intended to support the BN government in the next general elections. 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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