

DYNAMICS OF THE MEDIA AND YOUTH TRANSFORMATION IN MALAYSIA: AN OBSERVATION

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ABSTRACT

The changes in the government approach of managing the media sector and the proliferation of internet have transformed the politico-cultural values of youths in Malaysia. Such changes generated youths who are informed, democratically inclined, demanding and contentious. As a country where youths command control over the electorate register, measures to respond to the transformation are imminent especially from the ruling party point of view. Their votes become more appealing in the Malaysian political scene especially after the March 2008 General Election. The 1Malaysia concept reflects the Barisan Nasional government aspiration to reconnect and reconcile with Malaysians. However, will 1Malaysia be able to reconnect and reconcile with the youths? To provide an answer for this question, this paper is intended to explore the social transformation of Malaysian youths in the first decade of the second millennia. The concept of 1Malaysia was brought by Dato' Seri Mohd. Najib Abdul Razak is analyzed to gauge its potential to reconnect and reconcile with the transformed youth of Malaysia. Various aspects of how the youths were transformed through the structural changes in the media industry and technology are discussed.

Keywords: 1Malaysia, Youth Transformation, Social Change

ABSTRAK

Perubahan dalam pendekatan kerajaan untuk memantau sektor media dan impak penggunaan internet telah mengubah nilai politik dan budaya belia Malaysia. Kini belia lebih berpengetahuan, lebih mendesak dan cenderung dalam mengejar idealisme demokrasi. Transformasi sedemikian tidak boleh dipandang remeh. Parti-parti politik terutamanya parti pemerintah memandang serius perubahan tersebut memandangkan majoriti pengundi terdiri daripada belia. Kepentingan belia dalam menentukan keputusan pilihan raya menjadi semakin nyata selepas pilihan raya umum 2008. Kerajaan Barisan Nasional mengorak langkah untuk cuba membina semula hubungan dengan golongan belia yang sudah berubah melalui konsep 1Malaysia. Namun begitu, mampukah konsep tersebut membantu

kerajaan Barisan Nasional untuk mendapat sokongan belia? Bagi menjawab persoalan ini, artikel ini menyorot transformasi sosial yang melanda belia Malaysia. Konsep 1Malaysia yang diperkenalkan oleh Dato' Seri Mohd. Najib Abdul Razak dianalisis bagi menilai potensi konsep tersebut dalam meraih sokongan belia. Pelbagai aspek yang berkaitan dengan transformasi belia akibat perubahan struktural dalam industri media dan juga teknologi turut dibincangkan.

Kata Kunci: *1Malaysia, Transformasi Belia, Perubahan Sosial*

INTRODUCTION

Social change is an ongoing process which reforms meanings and structures (Sztompka, 1994:11). Through this process, various elements of society are relabeled. Consequently new meanings will be developed. The new meanings produce another chain of changes. This ongoing process is part and parcel of societal development. A change triggers another change in some other part of a society. However, it is important to note that the changes generate differing implications to different parties who are engaged in the process. To some, change implies the need to restructure but to some others, change reflects the need to change for good. The effects of how the implications of change are perceived vary. If the effect of a particular change implies the need to restructure, it is also indicating social change can be managed by proper planning and maneuvering (Crowfoot, 1974). Contrary, if the change is perceived as a sign to change for good, the perception will empower change to happen naturally, disregarding whatever consequence that may occur.

The dichotomy of whether to allow change to happen naturally or to manage it with plans is not new. It has been the key to the differences between structural functionalist and social conflict theorist. Both parties comprehend the fact that society is always changing. What they cannot agree on is the nature in which the change will lead to. One of the products of social change is social transformation. A society which has gone through social change will experience how its members have transformed economically, politically and also culturally. Proponents of functionalism believe social change is manageable and ultimately society will achieve its equilibrium again after undergoing some maneuvering (Parsons, 1966). On the contrary, social conflict theorists argue that

social change is the natural output of conflict and therefore should not be controlled. In fact, proponents of this perspective which is found in Marxism encourage total change which to them is a type of solution to whatever that has triggered change (Harolambos and Holborn, 2000: 12; Giddens, 1994: 582). Their views suggest that social transformation can be either managed to control its effect or to allow it to progress so that the transformation will lead to a change where everything has been revolutionized.

As an entity of the socially constructed world, youth cannot refrain themselves from being transformed. Youth transformation has a lot of impact on many areas. In the political context, the impact is detrimental since youth are voters for now and also for future. If they have transformed culturally and economically, their political views may also transformed. As such, politicians are fully aware of the potential changes which can be brought by the social transformation of youth. Some may want the change to be controlled while some prefer the change to be full blown especially if the change incurs a transformation of political views. In the Malaysian context, youth are undergoing changes which have somehow resulted social transformation in many aspects. Ruling politicians maybe affected by the change while the opposing politicians may see it as an opportunity to ride the tide of change. Hitherto, the Malaysian political scene is on the verge of transformation too. While the ruling party is trying to manage the change, the opposition is fanning the wave of change.

The social transformation of youth in Malaysia which is increasingly noticeable will paint a new picture of Malaysian political communication. This paper explores the social transformation of Malaysian youths in the first decade of the second millennia and also to analyze whether the 1Malaysia concept brought by Dato' Seri Mohd. Najib Tun Abdul Razak will be able to connect with the transforming youth of Malaysia. 1Malaysia acted as a platform for Najib's administration to be politically connected with the people of Malaysia. Obviously, his approach is to manage change by expressing his political will. However, will his plan be able to reconnect with the youths who in the next few decades decide the make up of Malaysian political scene? Success of 1Malaysia to get connected with the youths will ensure youth reconciliation and stability of Barisan Nasional (BN) as the ruling party of Malaysia. Otherwise, the effect of change and transformation will favor the opposition as described earlier.

DYNAMICS OF THE MEDIA AND YOUTH TRANSFORMATION IN MALAYSIA: AN OBSERVATION

The development of late modern democracy has fueled political change worldwide. Western countries experienced the change in 1970s and the effect take center stage in the 1980s. These two decades were filled with economic measures by these countries to include more participation from market forces and private enterprises (Dahlgren, 2001:66). Similar measures were taken by countries in other parts of the world. Asians and South Americans transformed their economic model. Participation from private sectors in building as well as management of the country's economic surged in the 1980s.

Moog and Sluyter-Beltrao (2001) observed this change in countries such as South Korea, Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia. The liberal approach that affected almost all the countries around the world during that period certainly affected the meaning of democracy and its implementation. State control over economic and social institution loosened. Media being the fourth estate has seen a lot of transformation ever since. Media is no longer in total state control. In Malaysia, the establishment of TV3, followed by other private television and radio stations in the 80s and 90s indicated the decreasing role played by the state in the media industry. Even though the industry is still governed by various regulations, the privatization policy has benefited Malaysians who were then looking for more alternatives either for entertainment or for seeking information.

The media commercialization has molded a revolution in television programming. Private commercial stations are adopting new formats of news presentation which is fast paced and aesthetic (Moog and Beltrao, 2001:49). This worldwide phenomenon became full bloom in the first decade of the second millennium. Political news is dramatized and sensationalized. Private commercial stations in Malaysia developed programs which reflected the above change. Television stations produced investigative cum community champion programs. Programs such as *Edisi Siasat*, *Bersamamu* and *360* highlighted various issues which are plaguing Malaysians. Some of the issues highlighted were related to the efficacy of the government and politicians. Very often too politicians were brought into talk shows. In these talk shows, politicians were bombarded with questions which again may demonstrate efficacy of them and also of the political parties or government bodies which they are representing. An example of such programs is *Hujah*.

Due to the popularity of such programs, government owned stations joined the fray and produced programs of similar nature. Debat and What Say You were some of the programs produced by RTM and are of similar nature to the programs mentioned earlier.

The changes in how media is managed have to a certain extent influenced the culture of the people. Media has the capability to shape and influence messages which are discussed and used in everyday life and become integrated into the cultural world (Dorothy Hobson, 1980; Samovar and Porter, 2007). Sassi Sinikka (2001:89-108) explained precisely how semiotic public sphere is influencing the construction of civil society. Mass media circulates ideas, texts and visions which spur the development of civil society. Culturally, the political public sphere is filled with individuals who are socially connected and yet individually the sense of being responsible to their community.

The development of media industry in Malaysia has inadvertently or may also advertently introduce the civil society vision to Malaysian youth. Generally, Malaysians are becoming more concerned on the issues which are revolving in their individual as well as their community life. Their sensitivity and response to issues such as the fall of Pakatan Rakyat government in Perak and also the cow head march in 2009 are evidences of the change in the political public sphere of Malaysians. Wide coverage from the print and electronic media has once again stirred public interest on the development of politics in Malaysia. Public discourse on these issues is a sign of their consciousness on the issues surrounding them which are then translated into a range expressive reaction.

REINTERPRETING POLITICAL CULTURE OF THE YOUTH: THE EFFECT OF SOCIAL CHANGE

Another agent which has been radically influencing the culture of the second millennium people will be none other than the “net”. The rapid development of multimedia information communication technology has changed the meaning of communication. The internet which emerges and became popular in the 1990s has revolutionized not only communication but also how people live and think. It has been termed as the agent behind social changes particularly in the political arena (Tang, 2009; Sinikka, 2001).

The emergence of social media network and other multimedia communication tools in the internet have to a certain extent works the same way how television and radio broadcasting work; influencing public sphere discussion to shape culture. Facebook, Friendster and other social media have hooked many especially the youth to be engaged in electronic meetings where views are shared almost unregulated. Similarly, bloggers are actively seeking attention from their readers and views are also shared almost freely. The phenomenon of youth dependency on the internet affect youth globally. In a study conducted in Australia, respondents claimed high usage of online resources to get their access to their daily news (Knight and Basu, 2009: 5-5).

Malaysian youths are no strangers to all these development. The “net” society in Malaysia emerge along with the shift of technology which Malaysia in the 1990s. Through the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) project which was launched by the Malaysian government on 1st August 1996, internet was introduced to Malaysians. MSC was essential for Malaysia to shift her economy which was then ferociously challenged by the emerging economies such as Vietnam and China. As a measure to develop the internet, the Malaysian government pledged not to censor the internet content. Consequently, Malaysians became involved in internet commercially and also politically. However, political blogging activities did not pick up its momentum. It was only after the arrest of Anwar Ibrahim, political blogging and political websites became popular. After the arrest of Anwar, 50 websites which were related to reformasi emerged (Abbott, 2004: 82). . The internet has since become an alternative medium to the traditional media and played an important role in determining the political scene of Malaysia (Abbott, 2004; Tang, 2009).

Besides disseminating information, the internet has provided a platform for Malaysians to exchange views and subsequently shapes their mind and action. The internet was attributed to the poor performance of BN in the 2008 election (Tang, 2009: 17). Malaysian youths in particular relied heavily on the information laid in the internet. 60% of respondents between the ages of 21 to 40 years trusted blogs and online news for reliable information (Tang: 17). Political blogs and websites mushroomed in the Malaysian cyberspace. News portal such as Malaysiakini emerged as a very popular website. It was identified as an independent, gutsy and willing to tell it all news portals (Steele, 2009: 94).

Numerous other political sites as well as pseudo news portal were created. Some became very popular and to a certain extent has command on the political views of Malaysia. Malaysia Today is one of such websites. Views presented by Raja Petra, founder and chief editor of Malaysia Today were critical, bold and has the potential to shape the views of his readers. Due to the influence of the internet, politicians set up their blogs in the internet. Some were quite successful. Politicians either from BN or Pakatan Rakyat expressed their views via their blogs. The dynamic relationship between readers of blogs and online news with the author has indicated not only the effectiveness of internet but also the expressive side of the readers. Discussion threads which normally follow every piece of information released through blogs and websites will exhibit the criticality and expressive side of Malaysians.

Development in the Malaysian media and information communication technology has significantly contributed to the shifting intrinsic and extrinsic politico-cultural paradigm of Malaysian youths. Extrinsically, the youth are more vocal in their opinion and choices. Intrinsically, they are more inquisitive and demanding for more of expression and choices. Media and the internet have brought many changes to how the youth interpret and respond to the various issues surrounding them in their everyday life. The detonation of the information reservoir and the construction of a more expressive society have generated a generation of youth who are informed, democratically inclined, demanding and contentious. Karen Kueh and Boo Ho Voon (2007) who had conducted a research on the evidence of the proliferation of Generation Y in Malaysia discovered transformation of cultural patterns among Malaysian undergraduates. Their study which was done by using Hofstede's Value Dimension (Hofstede, 2000) as an instrument had proven the shift of the youth cultural value. Youth studied exhibited demanding traits which reflected their low power distance nature.

1MALAYSIA: RECONNECTING AND RECONCILLING?

In summary, the technological and media landscape of Malaysia have changed. The first decade of the second millennia is witnessing the effect of change brought by internet and government polices to liberalize the media sector. These changes have resulted in changes in the welstanchuung of youths in Malaysia. With such changes, BN is in jeopardy. After ruling

for more than five decades, BN is in a disadvantaged position if compared to the opposing Pakatan Rakyat. Malaysian, in particular the youths will be scrutinizing the steps taken by BN. Therefore, the opposition may be hoping the transformation of Malaysian youths politico-cultural values will benefit them either immediately or in the near future. They are projecting themselves as the alternative, a step they have taken in the 1999 general election and the step was repeated in 2008. Their move had shown positive result in the 2008 general election (New Straits Times, 10 March 2008) the time when the effect of media and internet on youth was at their full swing.

When Najib took over as the sixth prime minister of Malaysia in 2009, his primary task would be to regain Malaysians trust on BN. Various issues which are related to the plural nature of the Malaysian society cropped up. Results of the 2008 election indicated the support from the non-Malays particularly in Peninsular Malaysia had shifted to the opposition. Issues related to the execution of democracy in Malaysia were also imminent. BN was definitely sliding down the curve of support while Pakatan Rakyat ascending. The change which is fueled by the politico-cultural shift demanded urgent attention from Najib.

The culture of change seems to be in his top priority. This move is evident when he while giving his maiden speech as the president of UMNO in the 2009 UMNO General Assembly requested all UMNO members to adopt the culture of change. Obviously, Najib is aware Malaysians have changed. His plan for the changes that have to be made is apparently conceptualized and operationalized in his idea of 1Malaysia. In other words, Najib need to reconnect with the people of Malaysia by changing and by doing so the process of reconciliation will materialize. Youth being at the forefront of change will definitely have to be the targeted audience.

1Malaysia slogan reflected Najib's view of how the government should be responsible the people. The idea of people first and result oriented government is trying to portray his government commitment to deliver and abide by the demand of the people. This idea will be appealing to the youth who at this point of time are looking forward to have a more democratic government, i.e. government for the people and by the people.

While promoting the idea that his government will deliver, Najib has also unveiled his aspiration of what Malaysia should be in the year

2020 through 1Malaysia. Malaysia ought to become a develop nation by then and the key to deliver such result is the unity of Malaysians. The conceptualization of 1Malaysia is anchored on two aspects which are the unity of Malaysians and the socio-economic development of Malaysia. 1Malaysia dictates the idea of inter-ethnic acceptance and not merely tolerance. In order to develop the atmosphere of acceptance, Malaysians must abide by the principles of Rukun Negara and the Federation Constitution. The 1Malaysia governments will also strive for the people of Malaysia and guarantees social justice is enjoyed by all Malaysians. Through 1Malaysia, Najib urged Malaysians to adopt the 8 Aspiration Values which are designed to promote a result oriented society with integrity. For a start, his government has implemented the Key Performance Index (KPI) system where performance of the members of his cabinet will be measured objectively and systematically.

By judging from the above elaboration, 1Malaysia represents Najib aspiration to reconnect and to seek reconciliation. Malaysians in particular the youths have changed. Although the idea of 1Malaysia is somewhat similar to the idea of Bangsa Malaysia, 1Malaysia is more comprehensive. 1Malaysia includes the culture of high performance and socio-economic development as part of the concept. Such inclusion is in tandem with the outcome of the transformation which the youths have gone through. Civic minded Malaysians youths as described earlier are civic demanding and contentious. They have access to information which is abundant in the cyber space. As Malaysians, they demanded quality and professional service by the government. A quick glance into the threads of discussion of any socio-politico websites and blogs will reveal the true demanding and contentious faces of their readers. Hence, by promoting the culture of excellence among members of his government, Najib should be able to reconnect with the youth.

The nature of transformed youth in Malaysia may complicate the already complex inter-ethnic relation. Freedom of expression which they are now enjoying in the internet has provided a room for them to divulge their feelings on issues related to inter-ethnic relation. It has created expressiveness among Malaysian youths. 1Malaysia should be able to combat the negative impact of expressiveness by urging Malaysians to inculcate the spirit of acceptance instead of tolerance. Policies which are seem to be fair such as development package to assist the various

ethnic groups living in the interior of Sabah and Sarawak will portray BN government objective to uphold social justice for all Malaysians.

Despite having the potential to reconnect with the youth, 1Malaysia does not guarantee reconciliation. This could be due to the transformation the youth had gone through and also the construct of the Malaysian society. By judging from the nature of the transformed youths in Malaysia, BN government is continuously assessed. The 2009 Auditor General report reported abuse of public fund and had caused public furore in the print and electronic media. Port Klang Free Trade Zone scandal had also generated a lot of unwanted publicity which affect BN government reputation. Such unwanted publicity has to a certain extent produced negative implication for 1Malaysia. The ethnically polarized Malaysian society may produce challenges for the implementation of 1Malaysia. Even though 1Malaysia is supposed to unite Malaysians, ethnic polarization influences how Malaysians perceive and understand the concept. Malays and non Malays in Malaysia have different interpretation of 1Malaysia. Discussion in the socio-politico blogs revealed how Malaysians of different ethnic group of different political stands reacted either positively or negatively to 1Malaysia. This trait is evidently exhibited by the youths when they responded to the high court ruling to permit on the usage of Allah term by The Herald which is a Malaysian Catholic newsletter. Demonstration held by Muslim youth movements (The Star, 9.1.2010) and articulation of opinions by the Malaysian Muslim and the non-Muslim in the cyber space sphere indicated the polarized stand of Malaysian youths on issues which are concerning their religiosity or ethnicity. Such diversity may be too much to be handled and thus the reconciliation process will not be easy.

CONCLUSION

Perhaps the greatest challenge 1Malaysia has to faced will be the transformed youth. Youth determine the future of Malaysia political scene. Their views and actions have to be prioritized. 1Malaysia is designed to reconnect with the transformed youth but the reconciliation will be difficult. Youths in Malaysia are no longer docile and pleasing them will be difficult. As such, the implementation of 1Malaysia should not be superficial. 1Malaysia must be translated into policies and programs which reflect BN's government aspiration to change and to improve.

The youths' paradigm has transformed. Najib's formulas of managing the effect of the change through Malaysia may not be able to achieve his ultimate objective which is to ensure power remain with BN if the government machinery failed to respond concretely to the demand of youths. All is not well with the opposition too. Even if they have the opportunity to be in power, they must ensure their policies and executions fit in perfectly to the needs of the youths. The informed, demanding, democratically inclined and contentious youths will definitely have the ability to choose again. Therefore, in contrast to the social conflict perspective, change does not stop after a revolution. Change should not be also dealt with by merely managing it. Change requires genuine response and action.

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