

Defining ‘New Malaysia’

Young adults’ and civic initiatives’
perspectives on modernity and participation

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Acronym list

GE14	Malaysia's 14th general elections in 2018
PH	Pakatan Harapan; Coalition of Hope
BN	Barisan Nasional; National Front
PAS	Parti Islam Se-Malaysia; Malayan Islamic Party
NEP	New Economic Policy
1MDB	1Malaysia Development Fund
PMTP	Penang Master Transport Plan
AUKU	University and Colleges Act
USM	Universiti Sains Malaysia; Penang's public university
KAUM	Klimate Action Utara Malaysia

Introduction

On the ninth of May 2018 an unprecedented event happened in Malaysia: for the first time since its independence in 1957, a new government got voted into power. The previous government *Barisan Nasional (BN)* held control of the parliament for over 61 years - therefore being world's longest ruled democratically elected coalition. During most of this period, BN enjoyed a lot of support by Malaysia's citizens, as the nation-state was economically thriving. However, since the Asian financial crisis in 1997, the coalition increasingly got in discredit because of its semi-authoritarian leadership, stifling of dissent, cases of corruption and organizing unfair elections. As such, many citizens did not expect for the opposition coalition *Pakatan Harapan (PH)* to win May 2018's elections.

In the advent of the elections, PH promised in its manifesto to “Rebuild the Nation and Fulfil the Hope of the People” and argued that the BN regime would “destroy the country if elected in government once again”. “The honour of this nation must be reclaimed”, PH asserted, pledging that “Pakatan Harapan would bring back the glory that Malaysia once had, so that we can stand proud as a globally respected nation”. By correcting the mistakes and wrongdoings of BN, PH assured it would fight for the eradication of corruption, the relaxation of authoritarian rules, and the improvement of citizens' economic position¹ – among many other promises.

With the increasing popularity of PH's message in the more urbanised regions of Malaysia, and with the political shift of the former PM Mahathir from BN to PH also winning popularity in rural areas, the elections became very hyped on social media. The surprising electoral upset of *Pakatan Harapan* was framed by the term ‘New Malaysia’: a concept embodying the hope for political change, a break from history and a new direction for the nation, widely being used in daily conversation, media and politics.

Analysing PH's pre-election stance, it promised to steer towards a reconceptualization of citizenship, ruling in terms of ‘good governance’ (Robinson 2007, 3) and ‘infrastructural power’ (Mann 1984, 188), striving for a better democratic representation. As such, ‘New Malaysia’ provides a case on the adaptivity of citizenship under political regime change. However, remodelling a nation-state's citizenship might not be as flexible as PH has argued during the election campaign, as it can be impeded by already-existing institutional structures.

¹Manifesto Pakatan Harapan. “Buku Harapan: Rebuild our Nation, Fulfilling our Hopes” 8th of March 2018

If so, how does a society change as a result of policy adaptations, and do these changes resonate with the needs, hopes and aspirations of its citizens?

Likewise, grand state projects to reform Malaysia are not new; progress as a nation-state has historically been defined by implementing a (economic) development discourse (Escobar 1995). In the case of Malaysia, this has been done in an ideological ‘high modernist’ authoritarian fashion (Scott 1998). This raises the question how development practices might adapt as a result of a governmental and societal change, and states can shift their focus towards the interests voiced by their citizens. Moreover, as the previous regime implemented its discourse in authoritarian fashion, one could wonder if, with the new government, citizens can voice against governmental ideas of what progress entails, share their ideas on modernity, and organize and politically participate, without repercussion of the state. As such, ‘New Malaysia’ provides an excellent case study that explicates the power struggle in diverting the course for a nation’s future, that can exist between state and citizens in the context of ‘modernization’ and political change.

Furthermore, Malaysia is a highly fragmented society in orientations, priorities and aspirations among its citizens, as a consequence of diversity by ethnicity, religion, geography and economic and political disparity. Over the years, the state has tried to overcome these differences with a rhetoric of unity and harmony, intending to foster a national identity in which all Malaysians are included. By doing so, the state aimed to implement the constructivist approach as is explicated by Benedict Anderson’s ‘Imagined Communities’ (2006). This proves to be problematic and lacking legitimacy, partly because the state’s ‘citizenship regime’ policies followed an ethnic essentialist model – as discussed by Anthony Smith (1991) - favouring one ethnicity over others. As will be discussed throughout this thesis, the setting of a course for ‘New Malaysia’ based on popular sovereignty proves to be problematic. Conflicting interests, identity politics (Fukuyama 2004), and differentiating ideologies on what ‘progress’ would entail (Wagner 2012; Weiss 2006; Soon 2018), interfere with the success story Malaysian citizens got promised during the elections.

A substantial amount of literature has already been produced within Malaysia, explaining why and how the Pakatan Harapan coalition won the elections². This research adds to this literature by continuing explicating the narrative by analysing citizen’s perspectives and experiences on ‘New Malaysia’ suggest. In the fieldwork period nine to twelve months after the elections, the

² See for example, Netto Loh 2018, Ooi 2018

expectations for political change had become milder; citizens began to realise that change does not happen overnight. This raises questions if Malaysia, being characterized by a strongly fragmented multi-ethnic society, can set a new course for the future. Malaysian citizens experience 'New Malaysia' with hope and doubt; we researched their perspectives on the period since the elections, and the future of Malaysia ahead of them. Furthermore, we analysed the changes in participation and engagement in the context of the governmental change, in order to define the meaning of the concept 'New Malaysia'.

Thus, in this thesis we aim to expose the meaning and implications of this major political event, and analyse the consequences of regime change for the nation-state, and the reconceptualization of citizenship and political engagement. We will do so through the eyes of two groups of citizens, who had an influential role in the elections. First, we will discuss the perspectives, hopes and aspirations of young adults, as well as changes in their societal position and political behaviour. Second, we will discuss the perspectives and aspirations of members of civic initiatives active in civil society, and their changing position and practices. Both groups, in theoretical perspective each other's opposites in terms of political participation, have been analysed in the urbanized areas of the state Penang.

Research groups

The first research group is covered by Bart van Gils, analysing university-educated young adults (21-30 y/o). In the speculations in the advent of the elections, many reasons circulated around how Pakatan Harapan could or could not win, with as often-mentioned argument, the influential vote of young adults. They are the largest age group with 23,8% of the voting population³. Thus, young adults were seen as a group that had the power to decide the elections.

As young adults were deemed so influential, many news outlets voiced concern about apparent 'apathy' among young adults, arguing that 'young people don't care about politics'⁴. Also in theory of social science is argued that young people around the globe are more becoming more disengaged from politics then before (Loader 2014, 143; Harris 2010, 11). Arguing against this line of thought, this case study demonstrates that the way young adults

³ Mayuri Mei Lin. Malaysia's youth have power they won't use. BBC News. 05-05-18. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-43985834>; Syahredzan Johan. Young people have a key role in GE14. The Star. 30-04-18. <https://www.thestar.com.my/opinion/columnists/a-humble-submission/2018/04/30/young-people-have-a-key-role-in-ge14/>.

⁴ e.g. Shannon Teoh. Mind the gap; the problem Mahathir faces with young adults. Strait Times, 11-01-18. <https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/mind-the-gap-the-problem-mahathir-faces-with-young-voters>

have been framed in media, as well as in the theory, differs from the actual perspectives and engagement of Malaysian young adults.

Civic initiative members - the second research group, covered by Lisa Pijnacker – have been very influential in the victory of PH as well, as many PH politicians started their political career in civil society. This intertwinement affects civic initiatives' current position after the 14th general elections (GE14), and causes a certain institutionalization of civil society (Lang 2013).

In the year after GE14, civic initiatives had to redefine their goals and objectives for Penang and Malaysia. As they have a different view on modernity and development from that of the state, civic initiatives generally opposed the more authoritarian traits of the former federal government, strive against overdevelopment in the context of Penang. In their wish for progress and a better Penang and Malaysia, civic initiatives aim to provide a citizen counter voice to that of the state, also after last elections. These civic initiatives have a leading role in shaping 'New Malaysia' and have managed to mobilize a substantial group of citizens. However, as will show from the data, the more traditional civic initiatives have difficulties in providing voice for the fragmented group of young adults.

In the original set-up of our research, we aimed to analyse the connections between young adults and civic initiatives. We concluded early in our research period that a vast majority of young adults are not connected or aware of the presence of most of Penang's civic initiatives. Therefore, our focus shifted towards explaining why these two influential groups do not meet one another. However, in the months March, April and May, a new small network developed between few university students and above-mentioned civic initiatives aiming to raise awareness of climate change by both citizens and government. A shared empirical chapter provides a case study with new insights in how these groups met, and how they perceive their actions within the context of 'New Malaysia'.

Research question

Thus, our thesis analyses three narratives; the perspectives and participation of young adults, the perspectives and position of civic initiative members, and the development of a network entailing both groups - all in relation and in context of the political change as a result of GE14. We attempt to answer the following research question:

‘How do young adults and civic initiatives define “New Malaysia”,
and engage with politics and citizenship in response to the State?’

Penang as fieldwork location

Our fieldwork took place in the context of state of Penang, located in the northwest of Malaysia. This location has been chosen with care:

First, the state of Penang is the second urbanized hub with much economic importance for Malaysia. Penang has multiple ongoing development projects, which many civic initiatives resist. As such, Penang provides a location in which the state and its citizens are in contravening interaction with one another –in most other states this might be less prominent.

Second, PH won the Penang’s state elections in 2008, and therefore became the first opposition state within the federation of Malaysia. As a result, Penang has become more decentralized from Malaysia’s federal government than other states. As a result, the case of Penang sheds light on the political framework of the Malaysian state, with the possibility to differentiate between the consequences of the federal victory with the earlier victory on state level.

Third, Penang has a more balanced ethno-demography, and appears to have relatively more friendly interethnic relations than in most other states. Furthermore, Penang’s university attracts a variety of young adults with different backgrounds. As such, in analysing the role of diversity, fragmentation and national identity, Penang provides a location with informants both opposing and in favour for the state’s approach to ethnic differences.

Methodology and reflection

Our research has been conducted in the period of nine to twelve months after the election, by using qualitative ethnographic research methods such as participant observation, semi-structured in-depth interviews and informal conversations. In a complementary fashion, both researchers addressed each group mostly individually, whilst addressing informants together when both groups had moments of interaction with one another. In total, 44 semi-structured in-depth interviews have been conducted; fieldnotes have been written for over fifty events, meetings and impressions.

The composure of our population has mostly taken shape by a coordinated snowball-sample, that started with prior established connections from earlier visits to Penang. This provided us a relatively easy access to our research groups. In addition, we sampled with the

‘hanging out technique’. In regard of young adults, all interviewed participants are between 21 and 30 years old, and study or have studied at Penang’s public university USM⁵. Whilst snowballing, the diversity within this sample has been emphasized, e.g. an equal gender ratio, different academic backgrounds, geographical dispersity, and voting behaviour⁶. In regard of civic initiatives, a more homogenous sample has been selected; the most prominent members of civic initiatives have been interviewed, who are activist in the fields of development, ecological and heritage conservation, or social justice⁷. With both groups we were able to build rapport by participating in meetings and interact on informal occasions. This was generally well received and participants were eager to engage and showed a similar interest in the background and personal lives of the researchers.

Reflecting on the ethnographic methods, and the anthropological discipline in general, we would like to emphasize the character of our research findings, in particular to the Malaysian reader. During the interactions with our populations, we recorded and noted their perspectives and (narrated) behaviour of informant in full consent and openness of our research aims. As such, our research data consists out of informants’ interpretations of social phenomena, as well as the researchers’ interpretations of the statements and behaviour of the samples. Thus, our aim is not to deliver indisputable facts on the social situation in Malaysia, or should be understood as such.

Nevertheless, this research attains its value by providing an in-depth insight in the understanding of university-educated young adults and civic initiative members in Penang. By providing their perceptions on the socio-political change happening in their direct environment, we aimed to share perspectives on sensitive subjects that are normally not accessible in quantitative, more generalizable researches.

In regard to our own positioning as researchers, we got involved with members of the climate network - described in chapter five – with whom we have a close relationship. Thus, we reached a certain level of engagement that is likely to have influenced to some extent both our informants and research. However, we aimed to keep this at minimum. By attending meetings and gatherings but not actively steer the proceedings - only giving our own input

⁵ Young adults within the sample are thus higher-educated by a public institution. Due to the limiting scope of our research, lower or non-educated young adults, or young adults with a private educational background, have not been taken into the sample.

⁶ See table I on page 29.

⁷ It is important to note that Penang’s civil society is larger than the group of civic initiatives taken into the sample. For example, religious, facilitating or supporting civic initiatives have not been taken into the sample, as well as civic initiatives strongly favouring the state.

when asked directly - we were able to observe closely without affecting decision-making or influencing the perspectives of these informants.

Structure

This thesis is structured by the following elements: Chapter 1 discusses the existing theory of nation and state, national identity, modernity, development, and citizenship - followed by a contextual analysis of Malaysia and Penang on these concepts in Chapter 2. Next, Chapter 3 discusses the research findings on young adults' perspectives, experiences and participation on 'New Malaysia', followed by Chapter 4, describing the perspectives and experiences of Penang's civic initiatives. Chapter 5 discusses Penang's Climate Strike Movement, which provides as a case study for changes in participation in New Malaysia. We conclude by drawing conclusions on the correlation of our empirical findings with the existing literature - by doing so, answering our research question.

1. Theoretical framework

As we aim to capture the perspectives and positions of young adults and civic initiative members in ‘New Malaysia’, the nation-state of Malaysia becomes the ‘object’ of researched perspectives, and a determinant factor on the position of these groups. Therefore, we will discuss the nation-state as a concept while paying specific attention to the topics of progress, modernity and development in the context of positive societal change. Furthermore, we will elaborate on how citizenship is defined in the nation-state, demonstrating the influential character of both state and citizens. In explicating on the relation between the state and its citizens, we focus on the particularity and relativity of conceptualisations of modernity, and the way they get contested between state and citizenry. We conclude this chapter by theoretically embedding the political participation of young adults and civic initiatives.

I. Nation and national Identity

Lisa Pijnacker

In the simplest definition, the nation-state is the conjoining of political institutions and a collective identity in a single sovereign unit (Calhoun, 2002). The nation, the first component of the nation-state, gets defined by Anthony Smith (1991) – in a somewhat essentialist perspective – as “a named human population, sharing a historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members”. The nation signifies a cultural and political bond, uniting a single political community who all share a historic culture and homeland (14-15). When we speak of a national identity, it involves a sense of political community. By recognising commonalities by having a common ethnic descent, citizens identify with a nation (Smith 1991, 9).

Thus, the ethnic model of national identity holds the notion of a presumed descent. However, especially in post-colonial states, individual identities are founded primarily in

membership of ethnic groups, which undermines the sense of membership in a larger multi-ethnic political community (Stevens 2009, 33). The definition of this larger political community described as national identity, quickly becomes problematic when multiple ethnic identities are present, each with their own cultural histories, myths and memories.

Therefore, a constructivist model might be more fruitful. Benedict Anderson (2006, 6) defines the nation as an ‘imagined political community’, referring to his notion that “the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each [member] lives the image of their communion”. Anderson argues that “The nation is imagined as a community because it includes a deep, horizontal comradeship regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each nation”. This definition allows for a collective, national identity, despite the ethnic differences within the nation.

National identity is primarily based on national history, and even though the nation is a relatively new concept, it is often imagined as ancient (Anderson 2006, 5). History and meaningful events legitimise national identity. Malaysia’s national identity forming is therefore a conscious effort to create a sense of an “imagining” of the nation among its citizens. Historical memory refers to the creation of cohesiveness, to rally support for the government and its leaders (Lee Kam Hing 2005, 170). Thus, in the definition of Smith (1991) different ethnic groups, may undermine the nations’ national identity. Multiple visions, ideas and stances can take shape in society, depending on the nation-state’s demographic composure. If a state opts for an – essentialist - ethnic model of national identity, and equality (in citizenship status) is not uphold between different groups, identities become politicized in the struggle for recognition. If the recognised group feels their position as justified, they will protect their position of superiority, which in turn causes identity politics to become more complex in a fragmented society (Fukuyama 2017; Tylor 1997, 7). Imagining a community of horizontal comradeship (Anderson 2006) offers a possible solution to this problem.

As such, in accordance to Anderson, national identity is first and foremost socially constructed (2006, 5). It can be challenged by different (ethnic) identities or politics and change over time. Different ethnic groups have divergent views on what identity entails, and this does not necessarily correspond with the identity that is imposed by the state through identity politics.

II. States: progress, modernity and development

Bart van Gils

The second component of the nation-state is the state, which has an authoritative role in shaping the plans that work towards an envisioned 'modern future', for both the nation, its citizens and the state itself. The state can be defined as a sovereign unit consisting of a collection of public institutions, which exercises a monopoly of coercion and extraction within a given territory (Smith 1991, 14).

In both theory and applied discourse, the 'ideal-type' modern state would be characterised as a territorially distinct, single sovereign political unit, with legally unlimited authority within its borders. In such states all citizens have equal citizenship rights and statuses (Axtmann 2004, 263-264). In reality, not many states uphold such 'ideal-type'. Notwithstanding, efficient states ought to have the centralised authority and capacity to implement binding rules, laws and policy decisions. Backed up by the monopoly of violence, states can enact on decisions as sovereign entity. Two different forms of power can be distinguished regarding such state capacity: 'despotic power' and 'infrastructural power' (Mann 1984, 188). Despotic power refers to decision-making by states that is centralised instead of negotiated, and enforced through the state's authoritarian use of force and coercive resources (Mann 1984, 189). Infrastructural power refers to the opposite: decision-making is embedded in civil society and legitimised by the state's citizens (Mann 1984, 188; Robinson 2007, 3).

In the eyes of the international community, states should work towards the 'ideal-type state' by 'creating' and 'applying' infrastructural power. This became very apparent when many new nation-states were founded as a result of decolonisation. Earlier ruled by imperialist forces based on despotic power, these new-found nation-states did not match such standards, and were categorised as 'Third World country' (Robinson 2007, 4). In addition, these states were far behind in terms of 'economic development' compared to developed nation-states in the so-called First World. What resulted was a 'development discourse' which aimed to modernise such 'underdeveloped' nation-states, by means of mirroring the modernisation process of 'First World countries' (Escobar 1995, 3-4; Wagner 2012, 3).

This development discourse took shape in the two decades after the second World War, formulated by scholars focussing on modernisation theories by for example Rostow (1959) and Hoselitz (1960). By major market interference and state reform, these modernisation theories would facilitate the process for Third World countries to transition towards ‘modernity’ in a linear, evolutionary fashion (Lorrain 2013, 87). This development discourse shifted over the years. During the 80’s it transitioned from an economic Keynesian to a neoliberal approach, moving away from an active role of the state in managing the market economy (Williamson, 1990; Robinson 2007, 12). During the 90’s this view was as well revised, emphasising that “institutions matter”, and therefore slightly emphasising the role of the state in development once again (Burki, World Bank 1998, 11-13; Fukuyama 2004, 21).

Political scientist Neil Robinson argues that since then the state is still “[...] a vehicle for controlling certain kinds of activity that inhibit development, but now development is market-centred, and the state has to achieve its ends through ‘good governance’ rather than bureaucratic direction” (2007, 11). ‘Good governance’ refers to ruling by a sound legal framework, maintaining strong institutions, and having an open, efficient and accountable democratic public administration, resistant to corruption, graft and bribery (Robinson 2007, 10-11; Fukuyama 2004, 8-9). Thus, states are ought to have infrastructural power to develop their nation, in which good economic circumstances must be guaranteed through political stability, established by a functioning democracy.

Post-structuralist and post-developmental scholar such as Escobar (1995), Scott (1998) and Wagner (2012) have criticised the patronising impact of science, as counter-reaction to its hegemonic conceptualisations. They argue that the development discourse originated from Western ‘developed’ countries, and is forced upon developing countries – particularly after the discourse shift towards neoliberalism. ‘Third World countries’ implement the ideas of the discourse in their national development policy, expecting progress by putting their trust in science (Escobar 1995, 5). Political scientist James Scott (1998) defines this phenomenon as ‘high modernism’, referring to:

“A strong, muscle-bound version of the self-confidence about scientific and technical progress, the expansion of production, the growing satisfaction of human needs, the mastery of (human) nature and above all, the rational design of social order commensurate with the scientific understanding of natural law. Originated in the West, as a by-product of unprecedented progress in science and industry” (4).

Scott argues that modernisation becomes an obsessive ideology for the state, attempting to create a fixed course for the nation-state's future. The ideology is objectified by a series of preconceived goals – largely material and quantifiable, often encapsulated in long term development plans (1998, 4). As a result, states can become authoritarian whilst following the high modernist ideology (Scott 1998, 95), in which despotic rather than infrastructural power is applied to achieve development. Straightforwardly, authoritarianism for the sake of development can be defined as 'authoritarian developmentalism' (Kelly 2003, 65).

Deriving from the insights of Scott (1998, 4, 95) Escobar (1995, 5) and Wagner (2012, 20-27), we can define the almost synonymous concepts of progress, modernity and development. All refer to engineered positive societal change in which the state carries the responsibility of establishing such change. Nevertheless, we see a differentiation in their meaning. We conceptualise 'progress' as the associated emotion of positive change, whereas 'modernity' can be conceptualised as the underlying ideology of how to achieve progress. How the modernisation ideology of gaining progress is put into practice, refers then to 'development'.

Continuing on post-structuralist thought, Southeast Asian scholars such as Ariel Heryanto and Sumit Mandal criticise the dominant ideal-type of the states within the mainstream development discourse. They argue that concepts such as democracy and good governance are not universal concepts or practices, even among Western societies, as they get particularistic by localised formations (2003, 2)⁸. Therefore, modernisation ideologies are not limited to one, but are particularistic themselves as well. As such, variation in the conceptualisation of modernity can become explicit in the degree in which states and citizenry value economic enrichment over democracy, or vice versa. Social theorist Peter Wagner endorses this perspective by arguing that the ethos of modernity can be experienced and interpreted differently based on the cultural background of those accessing it (2012, 23-24). Thus, a theorem of multiple modernities can exist, with conceptualisation of modernity differentiating between scholars, states, and citizens.

In line with this thought, Heryanto and Mandal advocate against the scholarly simplification of seeing authoritarianism and democracy in a continuum, such as development discourse' envisionment the transition from one to another in terms of 'democratisation'

⁸ Interestingly, Mahathir - currently PM of Malaysia, and also before PM between 1981 and 2003, wrote many books on developing countries in the world economy, with similar arguments as Heryanto and Mandel.

(2003, 18). By delinking authoritarianism from democracy, Heryanto and Mandel re-conceptualise authoritarianism as follows:

“Authoritarianism, just like democracy, is *not* a state of being or system that operates in a clearly demarcated territory, space or institution. Authoritarianism is understood here as a set of diffuse relationships both in the public and private spheres, where power is *never totally* concentrated on a single person or group, and [*never totally*] without legal or moral accountability to the public” (2003, 14, emphasis added).

Thus, according Heryanto and Mandal authoritarianism is not a system in which citizens have no voice, cannot contest discourses, and are surrendered to the will of the state. Power is not totally centralised by the (authoritarian) state. Therefore, citizens can still obtain power to change the course of development and influence the particular state’s ideology of modernity, either in favour or against state policy, as we might have seen in Malaysia’s last elections.

As with any discourse or ideology, citizens might agree or disagree. Development might not be distributed equally among the population of a nation-state, resulting in that emotionally experienced progress is not felt unilaterally nationwide. In another perspective, citizens can become aware of the negative impacts of strong economic development discourses and recognize how economic development affects the environment by depleting the natural resource base which in turn might undermine future growth prospects (Goldin 2018, 103). As such, what progress and modernity entails might for some people be very different than the hegemonic or the state’s notion of modernity (Wagner 2012, 20-27). A theorem of multiple views of modernity not only contrasts with the high-modernist confidence that states have when deploying the development discourse, but also complicates the role the state has in shaping the course of development for the nation and its citizens – especially in fragmented societies like Malaysia.

III. Citizenship: a contestation between state and civil society

Lisa Pijnacker

Where the state is following an ideology of modernity and implementing its corresponding development practices, it can be discussed, (dis)agreed upon and challenged by the state's citizens. We argue that the state's ideologised notions on modernity are put to the test, and get negotiated, between the state and citizens.

A general definition of citizenship is "full membership in the community with all its rights and responsibilities" (Marshall, 1950). In the very core of citizenship lies the 'social contract'. Richard Bellamy (2014, 12) describes in line with Rousseau (1762) that "the 'natural freedom' of each individual enjoyed in the state of nature is replaced by a 'civil freedom', that derives from each citizen participating directly in formulating laws that accord with a general consensus that stems from [equality] and applies equality to all". Closely associated with the social contract is 'popular sovereignty', which expresses the theoretical principle that the authority of the state and the government is sustained by the consent of the people - which is not always the case in reality.

Furthermore, the concept of citizenship can be dissected into three components; belonging, rights and participation (Bellamy 2014). First, belonging refers to being part of a national community within a nation, where national identity is shaped by a common civic consciousness (2014, 252). Feelings of belonging are strongly related to the near-future of the citizen; scholar Yuval-Davis argues that "individuals and groups are caught within *wanting* to belong, *wanting* to become. A process that is fuelled by yearning rather than positioning identity as a stable state" (2006, 202). As such, belonging is closely related to 'progress' as the emotion of positive change. Thus, feelings of belonging are prominent during elections as elections have near-future consequences for its citizens.

Rights, Bellamy's second component of citizenship, entails the ascribed status that guarantee citizens to being treated as equals and thereby gaining certain rights by virtue of being a legal resident within the nation's borders. This is based on the same virtues as the inherent freedom of the individual in the concept of the social contract, and can be linked directly to the facilitating role of the political institutions of the state. This is embedded in a political-cultural context where basic universalistic constitutional principles – according to

Western standards – must be implemented (Bellamy 2014, 269). As noted, established equal rights among citizens can be considered rather utopian. In reality, nation-states moderately and selectively grant citizens entitlements through legal and cultural mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, expressed in politics.

The third component of Bellamy is participation. Participation refers to the capability to act as a full and equal member of society. A suitable definition of participation would be ‘the acts that can occur, either individually or collectively, that are intrinsically concerned with shaping the society that citizens want to live in’ (Harris 2010, 10). This includes being able to vote, paying taxes, activities in a political organization, and protesting (Bellamy 2014, 337). By means of participation citizens can have influence in the national and local contestations of views on modernity. With elections, citizens can favour those who represent their view on modernity, and as part of a political organisation a citizen has the ability to, to a certain extent, co-produce policies. However, participation also entails the mundane everyday acts such as voicing one's opinion on social media, discussing politics, or participating in single-issue groups that do not argue against the policy of the state (Harris 2010, 11).

A central aspect in our case study is how political change alters the components of citizenship; we argue that what it entails to be a citizen, takes shape through the interactions between the state and civil society. We will discuss the actors - state, civil society and young adults - separately.

The state's citizenship regime

By deploying a ‘citizenship regime’, the state has a decisive role in who has access to membership of the state the citizen lives in, and thus defining a citizen's right to belonging, civic rights and options for participation. Vink (2017, 2) describes citizenship regimes as “institutionalized systems of formal and informal norms that define access to membership, as well as the rights and duties associated with membership, within a polity”. The regulation of political membership tends to vary significantly across time and place. Citizenship regimes include institutionalised norms both regarding membership status as well as norms regarding rights and duties associated with the status of being a citizen (Vink 2017, 3). The institutionalised norms are part of the formal aspect of citizenship, which refers to the membership in the nation. Formal membership rules may trigger political contestation, yet contestation does not necessarily stop the establishment of these rules by the government.

Juxtaposed are substantive aspects of citizenship, that refers to “the array of civil, political, socio-economic, and cultural rights people possesses and exercise” (Appadurai & Holston 1996, 190).

Civic activist initiatives and social movements

The government sets the institutionalised norms that shape membership of a state by a citizenship regime, but citizens play an important role in shaping citizenship. Civic activism describes the participation that members of a community can have in a political and social sense, and shows how citizens can be involved in decision making - especially by social action (Bloemraad and Ramakrishnan 2008, 286).

Individuals can join groups such as civic initiatives to represent their interests, and collaboration across groups can encourage to subordinate particularistic interests to a broader agenda of a social movement groups (Weiss 2006, 3). Such groups are defined by an “emphasis on flexible networks of informal interaction, shared solidarity and beliefs, collective action on conflictual, and action largely outside the usual institutions of social life” (Juris 2008, 10). In this sense, social movements can be described as ‘cellular structure’, opposed to the institutional ‘vertebrate structures’ of the state (Appadurai 2006). The flexibility, informality and activist character are often challenged by incorporation of the state; social movements therefore can be institutionalised, and become more vertebrate over time. Sabine Lang (2013, 73) argues that institutionalisation entails that members of the civil organization can trade outsider for insider status and enter career tracks in political institutions. If so, Lang argues that politicians generally still support the movement’s agendas and goals. Institutionalization can enhance the objectives of the movement and their political influence. However, they do often adjust their goals to their new environments and resources (Lang 2013, 74).

Young adults in civil society

Bart van Gils

Understanding young adults in the role of citizens, we can analyse the three components of citizenship (Bellamy 2014) towards their position in a society. In regard to participation and engagement with politics, one side of a theoretical recent international debate argues that young people are insufficiently engaged with politics, and not well informed about their role

of citizens, and less participative in traditional forms of voicing one's concerns (Carpini 2010; Levine 2007; Flanagan 2009, 273). Many researches show a disengagement of young people, that argues that states have lost much of their control over matters that are important for the lives of the youth, and therefore cannot authentically represent the interests of their citizens (Harris 2010, 11). This mismatch is caused by the forces of globalization, such as privatization, deregulation and individualization of society. In this sense, young adults would prioritize focussing on studies and career, in order to secure their economic position, over being concerned with the traditional forms of participation, striving to change society itself (Furlong & Cartmel 2007; Harris 2010, 12). As a result, young adults are often deemed as uninterested, apathetic, and non-participatory towards political issues.

On the other side of the debate, this notion is criticised, arguing that the participation of young people by traditional means of collectivist, hierarchical social movement politics, has been replaced by 'new' more individualised forms of participation. Participation and engagement become less visible, often take place on online social networks, while young people are primarily concerned with single-issue politics (Harris 2010, 13; Loader 2014, 143 Furlong 2009, 292). Perceiving participation and engagement in this perspective, young adults are not necessarily apathetic or uninterested in politics; their forms of participation are merely less visible if one defines civic engagement in a traditional manner.

2. Context

Bart van Gils and Lisa Pijnacker

In this contextual overview we relate Malaysia to the discussed concepts and themes of the theoretical framework, such as national identity, modernity and development practices, authoritarianism, Malaysia's citizenship regime and civic engagement; Furthermore, we will discuss the elections and the occurrence of 'New Malaysia', and conclude with a contextualisation of young adults and civic initiatives in Penang.

From assimilationist 'Malay national culture' to plural 'unity in diversity'

(Peninsular) Malaysia gained its independence in 1957 as part of the decolonization process since the end of World War II. Colonial emigration and the formation of the federation⁹ merged multiple ethnicities in one nation-state (Heng 2017, 218). Malaysia's current citizenry consists of the following ethnicities: *Bumiputra* (Malays and indigenous people¹⁰) 61.7%, Chinese 20.8%, Indian 6.2% and others 0.9%¹¹.

The multi-ethnic character of Malaysia's citizenry caused friction and conflict from early on, as a manifestation of the economic disparity between Malay (*Bumiputra*)¹² and the Chinese and Indian (Non-*Bumiputra*) ethnicities. Malays had political dominance by a demographic majority, and by colonial tradition, as the British favoured Malays above immigrant Chinese and Indians. This led to ethnic friction, leading up to racial riots in 1969¹³ (Heng 2017, 219). As reaction to these riots the government implemented the 'New Economic Policy' (NEP). With the goal of eradicating Malay' poverty to create a more equal economic position among ethnicities, the state gave *Bumiputras* a high citizenship status more rights than other ethnic groups (Heng 2017, 218). NEP was accompanied by the National Culture Policy, which aimed for national assimilation towards Malay Culture.

⁹ Including Sabah and Sarawak, to get its current territory after Singapore was banished in 1965.

¹⁰ Including Orang Asli, Dayak, Anak Negeri.

¹¹ CIA 2017. World Fact Book, Field Listing Ethnic Groups. 2017 est.

<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/400.html#MY>

¹² *Bumiputra* literally means 'son of the soil', the term refers to the Malays and other 'indigenous' ethnic groups

¹³ Another important event was the Iranian Islamic revolution of 1979. It created new lines within the Muslim community and between Muslims and non-Muslims. The resulted in even more deteriorating racial and religious relations (Heng, 2017, 219).

This changed in 1991, when Prime Minister Mahathir announced '*Wawasan 2020*'¹⁴, a 30-year development plan aimed to accelerate Malaysia's modernisation. The main objectives were 1) create a sense of national identity, and 2) reach the status of fully developed nation with an advanced industrialised economy in 2020 (Hassan & Lopez 2005, 115). For the purpose of meeting the state's economic development goals, the first goal aimed to establish a nationally united citizenry¹⁵, thus fostering a sense of economic nationalism (Tajuddin 2012). With policies and rhetoric, the government intended to apply a constructivist model on the nation, in an attempt to create a sense of collective national identity in Malaysia's multi-ethnic society¹⁶. However, in 2019, Malaysia's citizenship regime Bumiputra differentiate Malays from other ethnic groups. Thus, by the Malaysian state's ethnic modeled citizenship regime, citizenship rights are differentiated by ethnicity.

In September 2018, the government announced the ratification of ICERD, a UN treaty for equal rights. A large group of Malays opposed the treaty, because many thought it would affect their Bumiputra citizenship status. An anti-ICERD rally was organised in Kuala Lumpur, where an estimated 55.000 people participated. This shows how race and religion are influential - Malaysian society remains divided and 'fragmented'.

Development and authoritarianism

Since Malaysia's independence, the state's top priority was to modernise the country according the development discourse, by means of industrialisation. Through this, the Malaysian economy booked great growth rates over most of the years (Hassan & Lopez 2005, 111; Kelly 2003, 65). In respect to the development discourse shift towards 'institutional strength' and 'good governance', the BN government under Mahathir took in the 1990's a relativistic stance. Mahathir argued that Western conceptualisations of democracy and 'good governance' are too focused on the individual, whereas Asian values take priority to the community. This stance allows for a stricter regime in the interest of the nation (Hassan & Lopez 2005, 112, 117-118).

Therefore, we can argue that Malaysia has implemented the development discourse with a muscle-bound 'high modernist' ideology, as is defined by James Scott. The Malaysian state prioritised economic development over 'western-style democracy' and 'good

¹⁴ Wawasan 2020 translates to 'Vision 2020'.

¹⁵ Mahathir's government aimed to create a united national identity by the concept 'Bangsa Malaysia', translated 'the nation of Malaysians' which emphasizes the place of non-Bumiputra's.

¹⁶ thus abandoning the assimilationist National Culture Policy.

governance' by means of the culturally relativistic 'Asian Values approach'. Malaysia can therefore be classified as authoritarian developmentalism (Scott 1998, 95; Kelly 2003, 65).

The state's authoritarian developmentalist character became more explicit whilst implementing Wawasan 2020. Dissent on these policies got cracked down; citizens were forbidden to argue against it, as it was enforced as taboo by oppressive laws (Hassan & Lopez 2005, 115). Cases of disappearing opposing politicians, activists and journalists have been reported. Among these laws are the Internal Security Act, Official Secrets Act, Printing Presses and Publications Act, and the Sedition Act, limiting citizenship rights such as the right of organisation, press freedom, and freedom of speech¹⁷. PH promised to abolish these laws, of which some have yet to materialise.

Some people argued that the (pre-election 2018) Malaysian state was not authoritarian, and had to be considered a democracy, as people were allowed to vote freely. Others argue that the state's authoritarian character was not only limited to the time Mahathir was Prime Minister. His personally nominated successor Najib Razak was accused of major corruption fraud in 2015, channelling about 700 million US dollar of the 1Malaysia Development Fund (1MDB) to his personal bank accounts. The corruption scandal was strongly denied by Najib and BN¹⁸. Nevertheless, it harmed the trust and legitimacy of his government among many voters. Whilst cracking down on these accusations and protest movements that demanded change, Najib's rule Malaysia became arguably more authoritarian by an increase of political arrests, legitimated by the appliance of above stated laws.¹⁹

On a national level, resistance against authoritarianism grew exponentially during the south-east Asian crisis in 1998, when Mahathir fired the economic policy overseeing deputy minister Anwar Ibrahim. As civic response many street protests were organised, which were tackled by harsh police tactics to break them up (Freedman 2006, 23-24). Ibrahim formed a resistance movement called *Reformasi*, aiming for justice, participatory democracy, the rule of law, the repeal of existing coercive laws, and the eradication of corruption. However, Ibrahim got imprisoned on charges of sodomy, and seven of the Reformasi leaders were incarcerated under the Internal Security Act (Hassan & Lopez 2005, 122, 130). Notwithstanding, the most important consequence of the Reformasi was the change from a 'single coalition system' of BN towards a 'two coalitions system', with the occurrence of

¹⁷ Some of these laws were installed by the British colonial rule in the fight against communist opposition (Anderson 1998).

¹⁸ Author unknown. "PM Najib Razak Charged 1MDB corruption Scandal" *Al Jazeera*. 03-07-18 <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/07/pm-najib-razak-charged-1mbd-corruption-scandal-180704045852576>

¹⁹ After the election Najib and his wife were arrested and are currently under investigation The 1Malaysia development fund is currently being audited.

PH's predecessor. Over the last two decades the Reformasi coalition *Barisan Alternatif* transformed into PH. PH offered an alternative to the ruling government and proposed big changes such as a better, more transparent government, economic management and the abolishment of authoritarian laws. Thus, PH, being an alliance from centre left to centre right parties, consisted of many former members of civil society groups originating from the Reformasi.

The elections and its aftermath: 'New Malaysia'?

Because the opposition coalition established a majority of the popular vote in the election of 2013, gaining 89 of the 222 seats in parliament, winning the 2018 election was thought to be a possibility. Thus, strong civil society participation arose make a win for opposition coalition Pakatan Harapan possible, partly by hyping the elections on social media.

In reaction to the 1MDB corruption scandal of Najib, Mahathir announced his return to politics²⁰. He established a new political party to challenge Najib and joined the PH coalition, which was deemed very controversial, as Mahathir cracked down the same opposition during his previous presidency. This power move might have shifted the rural Malay vote, which constituencies previously voted to BN²¹.

An extraordinary amount of election promises had been made by both PH and BN. PH made over 500 promises, among which tackling corruption, restoring public trust, establishing local elections and revoking many of the oppressive laws.²² In their first year, just a part of the promises is in the process of being fulfilled. Regardless of PH's first-year prestaton, the electoral victory of Pakatan Harapan could be seen as a twenty-year call for state reformation (Soon 2018, 222).

Furthermore PH's victory was proclaimed to be a break from history, and a promise for a 'New Malaysia'. How the concept of 'New Malaysia' has originated, is still unknown. PH mentioned between the lines that its manifesto "provides a framework for our desire to a new Malaysia". However, primarily social media has popularised the concept in common use. As such, we understand 'New Malaysia' to be larger than just the literal change of government. As we will argue onwards, multiple groups in society are constantly trying to define what it means to 'progress', and hence create their own version of New Malaysia..

²⁰ Mahathir had retired from politics in 2003.

²¹ Reuters. "Mahathir Mohamad, 92, to lead Malaysia opposition bid for election victory". The Guardian. 08-01-18. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jan/08/mahathir-mohamad-92-to-lead-malaysia-opposition-bid-for-election-victory>

²² Harapan tracker. <https://harapantracker.polimeter.org/>

Public life in multi-ethnic Penang

Malaysia has a very diverse society, one that is deeply fragmented in terms of race, religion, age, education and geography. In most parts of Malaysia's neighbourhoods are racially segregated, as well as many restaurants and schools. However, whereas in the more conservative and rural places this is more observable, the urbanised area of Penang is less segregated than elsewhere (Gordiano 2012, 136). For example, more interethnic connections exist, and more restaurants are - when halal - enjoyed by all ethnicities. For those who have been living in Penang for a longer time, it is by most looked upon as the norm, condemning forms of interethnic confrontations. Nevertheless, far more than in other federal states, Penang is characterised by "consensual policy of marked acknowledgement of cultural differences among the various ethnic groups" (Gordiano 2012, 145). Penang is one of the few states without a major Malay majority; the ethnic distribution in 2018 is +/- 40% Bumiputra, 40% Chinese and 10% Indian.

Furthermore, PH had already a victory in Penang's state elections of 2008, which gave Penang the reputation of a 'rebellious opposition state' compared to Malaysia's more conservative states. Lower level administration is carried out by the state government, including Penang's development plans. In practice, the federal government sometimes intervened in state affairs (Nooi 2008, 127).

Civil society of Penang

Interethnic secular political participation by citizens occurs more in Penang than in other places (Kelly 2003, 67). By many different strategies, Penang Based NGOs such as ALIRAN, Penang Forum and SUARAM negotiated or resisted national or state policy and created a channel of alternative political thinking (Kelly 2003, 67-76). As Kelly describes:

"The island may not be a hotbed of oppositional politics, but it has spawned an unusually rich group of organizations seeking to advance a critical and reformist agenda. To the extent that Penang does stand out in the national context in this respect, it illustrates the spatial variability of state power and spaces for civil society formation around it." (2003, 74).

With previous opposition now in power, questions arise on how initiatives operate nowadays, in a fragmented society and within the new national political landscape. This is a particular

question for Penang, due to the fact they already had an opposition government on a state level after the 2008 elections and a strong civil society scene.

Young Adults in Penang

In the south-eastern part of Penang island is Penang's public state university located, Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM). USM university attracts students from all over Malaysia, making it a diverse group of young adults of different backgrounds. One of the authors, van Gils, followed six months of education at the USM university. During lectures and tutorials or meals, students of the same race would group together, by which not much interaction between other races happens.

Some of the USM faculty members, former faculty members and graduates have (played) an active role in civil society organisation, that some scholars explain that Penang have been left with more space for intellectual pursuits and social activism than other federal states (Kelly 2003, 76). However, social activism by students is actively limited and discouraged by the university; in a constitutional fashion, by the university and colleges act (AUKU), but also by university policy and its rhetoric itself.

3. Young adults' perspectives and participation

Bart van Gils

The position of Malaysian young adults is characterised by a paradox. On the one hand, young adults have much electoral power, as a result of Malaysia's very young population. On the other, young adults are understood as a group that does not enact on that power; according media sources, interviewed lecturers and journalists, young adults do not participate and engage with politics, and are thus politically apathic. Instead, I will demonstrate in this chapter, young adults are well informed and opinionated in regard of politics, but are limited in the more traditional and visible ways of participation by the norms, values and practices in Malaysia's society. Thus, this case study will both shed light on the perspectives and position of young adults in 'New Malaysia', as well as on the effects a political change can have on participation, which contributes to the ongoing theoretical debate.

For this case study, 22 young adults have participated in semi-structured in-depth interviews. All young adults are between 21 and 30, and are student at USM, or have graduated from USM in recent years. Whilst inviting informants to participate, I focussed on creating a diverse sample of young adults. See table 1 (below) for its composure²³.

In the first subsection I will discuss, the perspectives and experiences of young adults of the elections and their first- or second-time voting. Furthermore, I will describe the initial experience of one year 'New Malaysia'. The second and third subsection discusses their hopes and aspirations for Malaysia, showing the interest young adults take in politics. The second subsection is focused on progress, modernity and development, whereas the third is focused on national identity, interethnic relations and Malaysia's citizenship regime 'Bumiputra'. The fourth subsection discusses young adults' participation in politics in relation to the factors that are enabling or limiting public political participation.

²³ In addition, other young adults have been addressed by informal conversations and 'hanging out'. For the contextual purposes, also four lecturers and three journalists have been interviewed, either semi-structured or informal.

Table I: descriptive statistics informants (N=22)

Occupation	Student	17
	Working graduate	5
Gender	Male	13
	Female	9
Origins	<i>West-coast peninsula</i>	17
	Penang	10
	Kuala Lumpur	5
	Perak	2
	<i>East-coast peninsula</i>	5
	Kelantan	3
	Pahang	2
Race	Malay	10
	Chinese	8
	Indian-Malay	1
	Chinese-Indian	1
	Malay-Chinese	1
	Orang Asli	1
	Other	2
Education	Linguistics related studies	8
	Humanities	11
	Science	3
Studies	Literature	1
	English for professionals	3
	Translation Malay-English	2
	Linguistics	2
	Political science	3
	Development studies	1
	Communication	2
	Business school	2
	Economics	1
	Education studies	1
	Physics	1
	Chemistry	1
	Food science	1

Source: Interviews young adults

I. One year ‘New Malaysia’: young adults’ perspectives on Malaysian politics

The elections

The night of the election results of Malaysia’s 14th General elections (8th-9th of May 2018) is one that is vividly remembered by young adults. The elections meant for most informants their first time to experience a day of waiting in long queues, dipping an index-finger in purple election ink, and casting their votes, whilst being reunited with family members or high school friends. Young adults that did not originally come from Penang, had to travel across country to vote in their home constituency. Excitement, that is how most young adults characterized this particular day, which followed by an even more exciting night waiting for the results.

PH voters felt a sense of justice, being proud of the change that the *Rakyat*, the people, had established. This coincided with both relief and disbelief. A literature student shared her experience:

“I remember sitting there in silence, watching the live updates. They were rolling in very slowly. I was up till 5 or 6 in the morning, because everyone wanted to see what was going to happen. But I remember sitting there, there was a feeling of relief. [...] I was thinking: “Wow, we actually did it!”. But also: “We did it, now what?!”, we got a new party, what are they going to do?”²⁴²⁵

Similar sentiments were shared by other informants. Some mentioned they experienced the elections also as tense or scary. A working graduate at tech-firm mentioned:

Something new was going on. Finally, the voices of the people are heard, despite all the efforts of the previous government to delay the results, hide the results, and the fact that they were losing. everyone waited till very late that night. But in the end the truth came out. That was an achievement, without causing any chaos. without spilling any blood. So that was a good thing. [...] I was happy, and proud. Proud because, like I said, the voices of the people are heard, finally there will be some changes.²⁶

²⁴ Interview with Nora, literature student. 25-2-2019.

²⁵ Informants mentioned in quotes or references have fictitious names. If fictitious names, race or other background details are not mentioned, it has consciously done so in order to ensure anonymity of the informant.

²⁶ Interview with Hannah, a working graduate. 23-2-2019.

Voting behaviour

We see that practically all informants showed an interest in the elections. Those who did not vote, either because they were too young or forgot registering in time, expressed regret; they wanted to be part of the change.²⁷

**Table II: voting behaviour and preference
young adults (N=22)**

Voting behaviour	
Did vote	14
Did not vote: work limitations	1
Did not vote: not 21 years old during registration	4
Did not register: forgot	2
Abstained voting: political consideration	1
Party/coalition preference	
Voted for PH	9
Voted for BN	2
Voted for both PH and BN (Different vote federal and state level)	1
Voted for PAS	2
Could/did not vote, but support PH	8

Source: semi-structured interviews young adults

It appears to be that winning coalition PH got much support from young adults. Also within my sample, most supported PH (19 out of 22, see table II). A often mentioned reason why PH won is that voters not voted particularly for PH, but wanted to remove BN to oust the allegedly corrupt former prime minister. To some extent this is true; a couple of informants mentioned they would vote for BN if PH does not 'does its job'.

²⁸ PAS (Malayan Islamic Party) was part of PH during the general elections in GE13. It contradicts strongly with the ideas of the other parties of PH, but rallied together to stand a chance to challenge BN to form a government.

Others voted primarily for former prime minister Mahathir to regain power, and not for PH specifically. Often his experience, wisdom and literacy are praised, especially by Malays. Some non-Malays are less enthusiastic about Mahathir, and had the feeling they did not really have a proper choice - the corrupt BN, or the authoritarian-race oriented Mahathir. Other young adults do not seem too worried about Mahathir's leadership style, preferring strong leadership over the indecisiveness of democratic deliberation.

Those who voted for PAS²⁸ and BN did not complain about the election results. Two of the BN voters did only vote partly for BN (on federal or state-level), and did so to make sure their local constituency would be well represented. Young adults who voted for PAS did so out of ethnoreligious concerns - according to them, PH would not represent the interests of Malays) as good as PAS.

New Malaysia?

After the elections 'New Malaysia' would promise a country without rampant corruption, transparency and more civil freedom for its population. In other words, Pakatan Harapan would apply 'good governance' and infrastructural power (Robinson 2007, 10-11). In spite of that, PH did not enjoy the same support one year after GE14²⁹. Most young adults argued they did not experience major changes in their daily life as a result of the new government; they expected more³⁰. A particular pessimistic informant phrased in an informal conversation 'New Malaysia' as followed:

R(eseacher). You said that media, politicians, and quite a lot of people started using the term 'New Malaysia'. What does it mean?

I(nformant). It's them being naive, that's what it is.

R. Naive, why?

I. Because they are so willing to believe in change that they are not actually willing to hold our politicians accountable for the shit that they do.³¹

²⁸ PAS (Malayan Islamic Party) was part of PH during the general elections in GE13. It contradicts strongly with the ideas of the other parties of PH, but rallied together to stand a chance to challenge BN to form a government.

²⁹ R. Loheswar. PKR leaders not surprised by govt's low approval rating after only a year in power. *MalayMail*. 27-04-19. <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2019/04/27/pkr-leaders-not-surprised-by-govts-low-approval-rating-after-only-a-year-in/1747476>

³⁰ With some exceptions, like the new national smoking ban at restaurants or the levying of toll taxes

³¹ Informal conversation with Nora, English literature graduate. 11-2-2019.

If nothing has changed in the experience of young adults, can we speak of ‘New Malaysia’? Most young adults have not surrendered hope on PH. They argue that nine to twelve months is a relative short period, and that therefore PH should get time to fulfil its promises. As a food science graduate argued:

To implement change takes time. I share the sentiment of the frustration that it doesn’t go as fast, but I am willing to wait. We should keep them accountable on the way, but it is easy to criticize when not standing in the shoes of the politicians.³²

Like this student, some argue that because ‘the mess that BN left’, PH needs time to ‘clean it up’. Others, like the pessimistic student quoted above, have doubts PH can create ‘real change’, but are in that sense not ‘apathetic’. These young adults are not showing enthusiasm, but still keep themselves informed on new developments surrounding politics, saying they don’t care about politics, while simultaneously having a strong opinion on politics and society.

Based on the experience of the elections and the period of ‘early New Malaysia’ afterwards, a couple statements can be made. First, young adults are, at least since the elections, fairly engaged in politics, contrarily to the global trend that Carpini (2010), Levine (2007) and Flannagan (2009) describe. Second, young adults seem to be aware of the possibility to speak out and keep the government ‘accountable’. However, as most young adults are new voters, and do not have experience voicing their concerns prior the elections, most informants might have a hard time recognising institutional changes and shifts towards popular sovereignty. The humble statement of a student linguistics captures this idea:

- I. I don’t see many major changes. But well, some people say like, it’s not even a year ago, so let’s give PH some time.
- R. Do you agree with that?
- I. I guess so, but I don’t really know. I am not like the previous generation. I do not have many years of the former dominant party, so I wouldn’t know the actual effects of a sudden change of power³³.

Thus, as third argument, first-time voting young adults are relatively new with politics, by which they are limited in comparing the BN and PH regime. This does not imply that young

³² Interview with Izarra, a Malay graduate in food science. 19-3-2019.

³³ Interview with Miles, Chinese linguistics student. 7-3-2019.

adults are uninformed or are lacking political opinion. Rather, it can be argued that the political perspectives of young adults might differentiate from their elders as a result of being new to politics – and therefore have another perspective on Malaysia's future.

II. Young adults' perspectives on Modernity in Malaysia

I1: "I want Malaysia to be a modern country, but specifically people's mindsets. Because honestly, Malaysia's infrastructure is quite good".

I2: In mindset, we are still stuck in third world. Why is that? Politics, maybe culture.⁹³

As young adults had high expectations of the governmental change, but have not been satisfied after one year of 'New Malaysia', I asked what these expectations, hopes and aspirations for 'New Malaysia' are. By asking about Malaysia's status in terms of progress, modernity and development, related to how they envisioned Malaysia in the future, many informants answered similar to the two quotes above.

Instead of placing great value on tangible forms of modernisation such as urban and economic development, most young adults seem to prioritize change within society by 'modernising the mindset of the people', desiring a critical thinking, science-oriented society. This intangible conceptualisation of progressing and modernising as nation and society, roughly encompasses what young adults mentioned when asking their aspirations for 'New Malaysia'. Both perspectives on change are recognized by young adults as progress and modernisation, but one is strongly preferred over the other. Thus, a scenario characterised by the multiplicity in conceptualisations of modernity (Wagner 2006).

Young adults on urban development

When asked if they consider Malaysia to be modern, most young adults base their judgement in a linear 'evolutionary fashion', and thus showing similarities with the development discourse (Escobar 1995)⁹⁴. Young adults compare Malaysia to other countries in Asia, valuing Malaysia as less or more developed, such as Singapore and Japan. In terms of tangible matters such as facilities, technology and urban aesthetics, most young adults consider Malaysia to be more developed compared to most other countries in southeast Asia.

⁹³ Interview with Amar and Jon, two male political science students. Malay and Chinese. 3-4-2019.

⁹⁴ This also happens when not directly asking about modernity.

However, many emphasized that the accessibility of the facilities and the perks of development are geographically not equally distributed. Urban areas are a lot more developed than the rural areas, as well as the west of peninsular Malaysia compared to the east. Especially young adults from the east coast expressed this. In regard of infrastructure, only a few of the informants complained, such as that Penang is becoming congested. Thus, in the tangible meaning, young adults do not embody the state's 'obsession' of high modernism that James Scott (1998, 4) warns for.

In regard of the negative consequences that overdevelopment could bring, most young adults did only mention when directly asked. The arguments of civic initiatives who protest against negative effects of development⁹⁵, are only shared by few students and graduates. Moreover, the vast majority of young adults are not aware of the existence of these civic activist groups. One of the few young adults who is aware of the negative consequences mentioned the following:

The government doesn't really disclose much the plans, so you have to figure out by yourself what is going to happen. I think it's going to affect the climate. Even now they are building buildings, shopping malls, reclaiming land from the sea; I get it, they want to expand Penang and further develop, more metropolitan. But then they talk so much about sustainability, but after talking they go ahead with it regardless. But well, I'm not from here, I'm from KL. So it doesn't affect me that much.⁹⁶

This statement, among many others, describes how development issues are distant from young adults. Thus, young adults' understanding of 'New Malaysia' is not connected to state's development practices in terms of tangible urban development. However, in terms of a second, intangible conceptualisation of modernity, young adults make a lot of stronger statements.

'Modern thinking' for a modern Malaysia

In a discussion with a political science student about the perks of a government that is less authoritarian, the informant argued that more civic freedom is good, but not always practical: "Malaysian citizens still need some control. We don't have a mature democracy". "Mature?"; I ask for clarification. "People should first think through facts instead of emotion"⁹⁷. The

⁹⁵ See Chapter 4, page 53, for an elaborate discussion on the negative consequences of overdevelopment.

⁹⁶ Interview with Kim, a female communication student. 13-3-2019.

⁹⁷ Interview with Amar and Jon, two male political science students – Malay and Chinese. 3-4-2019.

general sentiment among most young adults is that Malaysians are not modern enough in their ways of thinking. One informant passionately argued:

New Malaysia should be with people start thinking. start doing things. Take the elections; people kept talking why they even should vote, or just voted whatever their parents voted. This kind of thinking undermines the countries progress, it's undermining democracy and is stopping this country from growing.⁹⁸

Young adults expect Malaysian citizens to be(come) moral, ethical and respectful, able to think rationally, make choices for themselves; not based on race, religion or emotion, but in the interest of the whole the nation. This perspective parallels in many ways with James Scott's high modernist ideology (1998, 4). Taking this theoretical perspective, young adults believe that modernity comes with a rational design of social order, as a result of 'rationally behaving citizens', instead of a social order based on emotion and power relations between the different ethnic groups in society. As such, young adults aim to change 'the mentality of society' towards a modern value system.

All but one of the young adults⁹⁹ are of the opinion that changing towards a 'high modernist value system' can only be enforced by the state and be implemented in its policies. Specifically, by generational change, modern values should spread top-down by means of education. Probably not coincidental, Education is the most mentioned aspect that young adults hope that will improve in 'New Malaysia'. Through education, young adults hope to create a 'critical thinking modern society'.

Defining what modernity in a fragmented society

Even though practically all interviewed young adults argue for a change of values, they differ in opinion if all Malaysian citizens need to modernize their thinking, or only particular groups. Three non-exclusive notions can be distinguished.

The first notion argues that the described change in thinking is necessary for Malaysians in general, who view the need to change the value system for society as whole – not linking this to a specific race, religion, geography, but to, for example, more political engagement or better work ethics. Most interviewed young adults can be identified with this notion, and did not show affiliation to the second or third notion.

⁹⁸ Interview with Alvin, a male graduate teaching English in private lessons. 20-2-2019.

⁹⁹ This informant, a young climate activist, believes in a bottom-up approach. His position, and a case study on Penang's climate protests can be read on chapter 6.

The second notion, shared by a much smaller group, is directed to specific areas or ethnicities. A clear example is this quote:

“If we talk about modernity from the ideological standpoint, we are still so far behind. We are still not willing to get rid of cultural elements that are backwards and useless, for example female genital mutilation, child marriage. these are all cultural elements that are not ethical, for one, they are also violations of international law, why they want to keep it?”¹⁰⁰

Above mentioned cultural practices do occur more often in the east coast states of peninsular Malaysia. These regions are more Malay, conservative, and Islam-orientated, while being less developed in the tangible sense¹⁰¹. By deeming the way of life at the east-coast as ‘backward’, some young adults value parts of Malaysia as better by imagining a geographically divide in modernity. Similarly, a Malay informant expressed his concerns: “My race is quite backward about some issues”. Some young adults, both Malay and non-Malay, value one ethnicity more modern than the other, by imagining an ethnical divide in terms of modernity. For example, The notion that specific groups should modernize, often parallels with the more widely shared notion that Malaysia should become a more secular, race-blind society, emphasizing the need for equality between citizens.

A third notion can be distinguished. Asking about the notion of ‘backward’ practices, I discussed with some informants the problematics of categorizing certain cultural values as modern or non-modern. One informant responded: “It is a really tricky way to call what is modern. Sometimes you have some cultural aspects that you want to preserve.”¹⁰² This sentiment is mostly shared among *few* Muslim Malays, who feel that their identity, position and religion is under threat. “We Malays need to protect ourselves”¹⁰³, argued a Malay young adult. As such, a young adults with the third notion want to preserve cultural traits and status quo over modernisation.

Indeed, both stances of the second and third notion have a polarising, aggravating effect upon one another. As we see, modernity is deeply intertwined with fragmentation over geography, ethnicity and religion.

¹⁰⁰ Interview, anonymized. 25-2-2019.

¹⁰¹ Informal conversation. Anonymized. 25-1-2019.

¹⁰² Interview with Faiq. 19-3-2019.

¹⁰³ Interview with informant from Kelantan, anonymized.

III. Young adults' perspectives on cultural diversity and identity politics

In a fragmented society in which each group¹⁰⁴ has their own cultural elements, judging one person as more modern than others can lead to tensions. Thus, identity politics can play a key role in the contestation of modernity; between citizens, but as well as a consequence of state policy. Young adults envision a 'New Malaysia' with more national unity and better interethnic relations.

National identity: 'Unity in diversity'

"Unity in diversity" is the oxymoronic catchphrase that both BN and PH have been using to clarify their stance, specifically when addressing policies on national identity and development.¹⁰⁵ It acknowledges and differentiates between the three major races, encompassing their differences by the importance of unity, horizontal comradeship – creating a national narrative based on the constructivist model described by Anderson (2006).

Similarly, when asking any young adult about Malaysia's national identity, he or she would most probably mention that so many ethnicities live in harmony together, which comes to expression in the diversity of cultural traits, traditions and a rich mixed national cuisine. Something to be proud of. As one informant put it:

"What does it mean to be a Malaysian... well to be part of this mixed society. Be friends with everyone, and well, FOOD! And well, if I think of this country I think of family. the 3 F's. friends, family, food. Hahaha."¹⁰⁶

Contradictory, when asking what they would like to see changed in 'New' Malaysia', it revolves around creating better interethnic relationships with less racial tensions, more harmony, and stronger national unity. This discrepancy between narrative and perceived reality, originates by the use of both national identity models – essentialist (Smith 1991) and constructivist (Anderson 2006). This indecisiveness frustrates young adults.

¹⁰⁴ Ethnicity, regions, age groups, religions, etc.

¹⁰⁵ BN used the phrase 'unity in diversity' during Wawasan 2020 and 1Malaysia. PH is currently establishing their own development scheme, 'Shared Prosperity'. Analysing the press statements, we can expect the same rhetoric will be continued as it is part of Malaysia's national narrative.

¹⁰⁶ Interview with Hannah, a Malay-Indian working graduate. 23-2-2019.

Bumiputra: Malaysia's citizenship regime

An often-mentioned frustration by non-Malays is the inequality in rights and status caused by the state's citizenship regime 'Bumiputra'. As discussed in the context, Bumiputra divide races by differentiating in one's rights as citizens, providing a higher status based on 'indigeneity' of Malays and Orang Asli. In a quantitative research executed before the elections, about 80% of young adults (21-30) did not supported the race-based quota system at universities that limits the access of education for non-Malays ¹⁰⁷. In this sense, an essentialist rather than a constructivist approach is applied, contradicting with 'the unity and equality' that the state narrates as national identity.

Whereas all non-Malay young adults disagreed with Malaysia's citizenship regime, about half of the informants with Bumiputra status share this point of view. They argue that Bumiputra is unfair and outdated. When asking young adults how they would like to see the system change, most envisioned an economic race-blind policy.

[...] a policy that benefits everyone, that benefits everyone that is poor. why have a policy that only benefits Malay? It's not only Malays who are poor, and why are there also benefits to Malays, who are rich? So it's something that helps rich people, while you also have poor Indians. so there is a marginalized class in Malaysia rights now, among the Chinese and Indians.¹⁰⁸

Also more conservative Malays could agree that an economic- instead of a race-focused system would be more fair, specifically regarding education quotas. However, they oppose the removal of the Bumiputra status. Most Malay young adults who opposed the removal, argued that Bumiputra provides a checks-and-balances system: Chinese have economic power, that should be balanced out by Malay political power until both races would be on equal footing.

Interestingly, when asking young adults what Bumiputra rights exactly entails, mixed and 'incomplete' answers were given, what suggests that it is not 'core knowledge'. This led to the understanding that frustration does not necessarily originates from factual inequality in rights, but from the state-imposed inequality of status and recognition as citizen (Fukuyama 2018), which infringes the citizens' feeling of belonging. An outspoken informant formulated her frustrations as followed:

¹⁰⁷ Press statement. Pre 14th Malaysian General Election Survey for youth voters: Preliminary Findings. *Centre for Public Policy Studies*. 05-05-18.

¹⁰⁸ Interview with Faiq, 19-3-2019.

I'm a minority, so I'm an Indian, I'm a non-Muslim. I do not have Bumiputra status because I don't qualify, even though I'm born here. So, it's no different from segregation almost. They treat me as a second-class citizen. So how can you demand my loyalty to this country if they don't earn it from me?¹⁰⁹

Most other informants without Bumiputra rights were less outspoken, but carried similar sentiments. Bumiputra is more than just rights; it exemplifies the identity politics in Malaysia in an explicit, judicial way. This undermines the credibility of the new government; many young adults hope(d) that the citizenship regime could change as a result of the new government.

Under the previous government, citizens' critique against the state's installed citizenship regime was stifled by bureaucratic authoritarianism. As such, dissent against 'unity' would be considered seditious, and discussing these topics in public was considered a taboo. As the PH promised more civic freedom and the revocations of authoritarian laws, media and citizens have now the opportunity speak more freely about these topics without risking imprisonment – both in favour and against more interracial equality, leading to further polarising that previously authoritarianism prevented.

However, in describing 'New Malaysia', an informant insightfully argued that there is more space for dialogue, transparency, and a positive outlook on the future. However, there is simultaneously more racial hatred can take place in society, as the opposition¹¹⁰ is vividly using the 'race card'¹¹¹, as illustrated by the opposed ratification of ICERD¹¹². PH underlines it is for equality between races. Nevertheless, previous racial policies remain the same in order to appease the Malay majority. Even though the state aimed to make only a symbolic move towards a constructivist modelled citizenship regime, it got stifled by the New Malaysia's opportunities to voice out.

¹⁰⁹ Interview, anonymized.

¹¹⁰ BN and PAS.

¹¹¹ Informal conversation with Hadif, 15-3-2019.

¹¹² See context, p. 24 on ICERD.

IV. Young adult participation and engagement with politics

On one of Penang's hot afternoons in the middle of the dry season, I make my way to a popular Chinese-oriented food court. People from all different stripes of life flog down to get a meal. I agreed to meet James for lunch. James, a former classmate, always friendly and polite, is a 23-year-old Chinese-Malaysian economics student. We exchange pleasantries and order some food.. A light and breezy conversation between two old friends.

Then James asks about my research. I explain my interest in Malaysian politics and the perspectives of young adults on this topic. Although James responds with enthusiasm, his body language changes. Without asking, James shares, almost whispering, vividly his ideas on what has happened during the elections. Every minute or so, the student scans the people surrounding us, making sure no one is eavesdropping. When the topic lands ethnic tensions, James is barely hearable.

I suggest going to the car park to continue the conversation. The feeling to conceal one's ideas decreases a bit, while the volume increases. I ask why the secrecy is necessary, to which James responds: "you'll never know if someone is listening. Better not take the risk". Surprised why he insisted on sharing his insights there and then during lunch, I ask if he cares about politics. "All I want is a house, a job and a car", James tells me. "You know a lot about politics though", I argue. James responds: "I think politics are important, but I try not to care too much. However, we do need change. And that change won't come in a very long time. Malaysia isn't ready for it". Without asking, the young man continues a minute later venting his frustrations, ideas and suggestions for a 'New Malaysia'¹¹³.

That afternoon lunch with James was not a unique event during my fieldwork. Quite often young adults were intrigued that someone wanted to research their point of view, and voluntarily shared their ideas on the most sensitive issues, even in places they were obviously less comfortable to do so. Even though many young adults claim they don't care *that much* about politics, they enjoyed sharing their insights. In the final subchapter on young adults I will explain in the obstacles and opportunities young adults have in regard of political participation.

¹¹³ A vignette on an informal meeting with James, a Chinese student.

Discussing politics

When considering political participation as a third component of citizenship (Bellamy 2014), the most passive form of participation is voting - something most young adults have done. Citizens who vote can still be apathetic. However, Harris' definition of participation (2010, 10) - 'the acts that can occur, either individually or collectively, that are intrinsically concerned with shaping the society that citizens want to live in' - allows for forms that do not necessarily need to involve activism or organised protest. Considering the experiences similar to the one with James, the most basic form of participation, discussing politics, seems already problematic.

In figuring out the implicit rules a wide range of answers have been given, as some talked solely with particular friends, some only with parents or brothers, and some not at all. A commonality however, is that almost all young adults argue that to talk about politics is not something that is smart to do in public. The majority is not comfortable to do so, emphasizing they would not talk about politics when they have doubts about the political orientation of those in hearing distance. This is apparent when directly discussing politics with people who might have a different political orientation. Out of respect, people who know each other would not discuss politics, in order to avoid possible tensions that might arise between them. People who do not know each other would avoid political talk, out of fear to be understood as offensive, possibly escalating into heated conflict. However, in some interviews young adults mentioned that in 'New Malaysia' there is more space for political discussion, although this sentiment is not shared with everyone.

(Student) Participation and University Politics

Being informed and opinionated does not imply that young adults are active participatory citizens, advocating the changes they foresee necessary for Malaysia. Noteworthy, just one of my young adult informants are linked to the activist movements in Penang. More remarkably, only very few have heard of their existence, although some young adults have mentioned the problems these civic initiatives are advocating for.

Nevertheless, I argue that young adults do participant, although in different ways. They do so by affiliating with non-activist one-topic NGO's, for example anti-bullying campaigns, teaching English or by being part of religious associations raising money and organising programs for the less fortunate. At the USM university such activities are also organised, in which young adults can participate and contribute to society on issues they would like see change.

Also, that most young adults prefer a more passive way of contributing to society compared to physically participating in activism, does not imply that they are not give voice to their concerns at all. Many young adults are using social media to do so. Over half of the informants share news articles on their feed that correspond with their political views, or issues they are worried about. In addition, a considerable number of informants are sharing their views on Twitter or Facebook, some going into discussion in the comments of news articles. One informant joined an election promises watchdog on Facebook. Young adults often mentioned people feel freer to discuss politics on social media than before the governmental change, although others suggest not much have changed. In my personal perspective, I do see more young adults expressing their views on social media then in 2017, particularly by major events such as ICERD.

As said, young adults do use social media to give voice to their political opinions. However, when asking if they would join a rally or demonstration, almost all respond negative. Many are discouraged by the risks it might bring along. First, in some cases parents actively discourage their offspring in joining these events, preferring their son or daughter to focus on their studies and career. Secondly, the university itself is also discouraging their students from taking part of activism. Under the previous government the university and colleges act (AUKU) prohibiting students from participating in activist movements, with the risk of being suspended or expelled. Although the new government is currently amending this law, the fear of the consequences is still present among young adults.

Regarding the university policies, not only activist activities are limited. Under the previous government, politics in general is discouraged by the university staff. It seems this has not changed much under the new government. According to three activist lecturers at USM, all student associations and initiatives need to go through a considerable amount of paperwork in order to approve their activities, as they will be scanned on politically sensitive matters, in order to be 'appropriate' for university¹¹⁴. Also, the unwritten rules and code of conduct, exemplify the limiting social structures on students existing within the university.

This speaks to a larger extent of Malaysia's society as well. In 'New Malaysia' new opportunities for participation for change arise, but change is simultaneously limited by the existing systems and structures, and those opposing the ideas of change. However, New Malaysia for young adults is a period in which a bit more freedom can be experienced, and new opportunities arise for changes, in which young adults are unsure what is and is not

¹¹⁴ For the political science club at USM, almost all activities had been denied for a few months in the year before the elections of 2018.

possible in these new circumstances. All considered, young adults might currently have a peripheral place in society, but time given, could be a driving force in making a 'New Malaysia'.

4. Perspectives and Participation of Penang's civic initiatives

Lisa Pijnacker

This chapter discusses similar topics as the previous chapter, focussing instead on the experiences, hopes and aspirations of members of civil society in Penang. In the realm of political citizenship, civic initiative members apply activism for sustainable development and social justice on both state- and national level. The four main topics, all politically contextualized by New Malaysia, are structured as follows. First, the experience and view on 'New Malaysia' by Penang's civil society; second, modernity and progress on Penang state politics; third, fragmentation and identity; and fourth, participation of young adults in civil society and the way civic initiatives address them.

For this case study, 19 members of civic initiatives have participated in semi-structured in-depth interviews. In selecting informants¹¹⁵, I have focussed on creating a broad selection of objectives between these initiatives. Noteworthy, some members were a part of multiple organisations and a few informants were activist and interacted within the network of these initiatives but were no 'official' members.

¹¹⁵ Statements made by informants and findings throughout this research do represent statements made by informants themselves, and do not refer to official statements or ideas of the initiatives the informants represent.

Table III: Interviewed civic initiatives, objectives, number of interviewed members

Civic Initiatives with local orientation on Penang		# inf.
Penang Forum	The Penang Forum is a fluid and loose coalition of progressive public-interest civil society groups. Aims to promote local democracy and sustainable development.	4
Penang Heritage Trust *Penang Forum member	Initiative for promoting the conservation of Penang's heritage and working to save the island's many historical buildings. In addition, PHT organises cultural, educational and public awareness programmes for its members and the public.	1
Penang Hill Watch *Penang Forum member	An initiative launched to allow the public to monitor hill clearings in Penang and report them. Reports of the latest cases are then periodically submitted to the authorities for their response and action.	1
Sungai Ara Linear Park community	Local initiative of residents to protect park from PTMP.	1
Langur Project	Initiative for research on Langur's and ecology on Penang Island. Advocating for sustainable development	1
#Youthforbettertransport	Youth campaign opposing PTMP	1
Civic initiatives with orientation on both national and local, based in Penang		
Aliran *Penang Forum member	'National Consciousness Movement', is Malaysia's first multi-ethnic reform movement dedicated to justice, freedom and solidarity both on federal and local level.	1
Suaram *Penang Forum member	NGO to monitor and advocate for the respect of human rights in Malaysia both on federal and local level	4
Third World Network	An independent non-profit international research and advocacy organisation involved in issues relating to development, developing countries and North-South affairs.	1
Harapan Tracker	A non-partisan citizen initiative to track, monitor and scrutinize government's performance and progress in fulfilling its promises after the elections.	1
Women's Center for Change	NGO, envisions a society free from gender violence and discrimination, and where women can actualize their full potential.	1
State (related) initiatives or institutions		
Women's Center for development	Women's development corporation, funded by Penang State.	2
PEKA	State funded youth volunteer organization to coordinate between NGOs and youth.	1
Penang Institute	One of Malaysia's main think-tanks funded by the state government. Aims to contribute towards making public policy-making in Penang and in Malaysia as informed and collaborative as possible.	1

Source: interviews Civic Initiative members

I. National politics, local consequences: New Malaysia for Penang's civil society

As described in the context chapter, Penang already had an opposition victory during the elections of 2008. This experience caused mixed initial reactions to PH's federal victory in 2018, and the idea of 'New Malaysia' in general. This section will explain the responses of civic initiatives to GE14's federal government change.

Initial reception and consequences of PH's victory

Civic initiative members describe the federal victory as a moment of hope for Malaysia's future, arguing that the fact that 'the *Rakyat*' were able to actually change the government was an important moment for Malaysian history. Both national and Penangite civil society groups were involved in Pakatan Harapan's victory; some in explicit manners, like campaigning, others in more implicit manners by allowing their civic initiatives to function as a platform to share political perspectives. Hence, the governmental change was seen as a major victory for the members of civic initiatives.

Civic initiative members often explain PH's victory as society's disapproval of the authoritarian character of the previous BN government. Although power under a more authoritarian regime is never totally centralized by the state (Heryanto and Mandal 2003), certain characteristics of authoritarianism can be seen in the former practices of BN. For example, a few civic initiative members mentioned the oppression of media:

"I remember when I was in high school and got more and more informed. In the end, I was like: "You know what, Malaysian politics is really really dirty." You can never get the full story and what you get from the media is always really diplomatic in a sense that the government decides what comes in as well"¹¹⁶.

Activism also got suppressed. Exemplary, some activist informants were put in jail or got suspended from their schools. In response to authoritarianism, civil society made efforts to create fair elections¹¹⁷ and get politics ruled by 'good governance' (Robinson 2007, 12). In addition, most of the researched initiatives in Penang took a stance against the state's

¹¹⁶ Interview. Female, 34-year old. Activist and Former employee of UN. 04-04-19

¹¹⁷ Such as Bersih: The Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections (Malay: Gabungan Pilihanraya Bersih dan Adil) this is a coalition of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) which seeks to reform the current electoral system in Malaysia to ensure free, clean and fair elections.

authoritarian developmentalism (Tajuddin 2012), striving to represent opposing ideas among Malaysia's citizenry.

In the first year after GE14, PH made some changes in regard of 'good governance'. Most mentioned by informants is the abolishment of the oppressive media act¹¹⁸. The media is freer, and the public can access more information, which is important for civic initiatives who aim to inform and reach out to citizens. Another change is the focus on transparency and reducing corruption within the federal government¹¹⁹. Informants differ in their opinions whether PH is succeeding in this. Furthermore, even though the new government is described as less authoritarian by changes that have already been made, civic initiative members still describe the state's strong focus on economic development.

Disillusionment of New Malaysia

"I think the election results were generally influenced by having a common enemy.

[...] This motivated so many people to vote against them¹²⁰."

According to this informant, PH won the elections by uniting Malaysia's citizens for the consequential removal of former prime minister Najib Razak. For civic initiative members, this unity did not last after the common enemy was removed. Most experienced a sense of disillusionment, feeling disappointed in PH. As some changes were made, but many promises not followed through, many informants describe "New Malaysia" to be contradictory.

Moreover, many politicians came from civic initiatives as they joined opposition parties to accomplish civil society's goals. With PH's victory, a part of civil society got institutionalised as many civic initiative members took up governing positions, trading their outside position for an insider status for a career track in political institutions (Lang 2013, 74). Members describe how their former "friends within the opposition" are now too busy to answer their calls and turned against them. According to some members of civic initiatives, the new politicians that got into power, were acting more and more like BN politicians. As such, a prominent former student activist, currently a civic initiative member, argued that 'New Malaysia' is "not new, just newly fucked". He argues that Malaysia's citizenry was caught off guard after the elections, as citizens realize every person has their own idea of how

¹¹⁸ Author unknown. Gobind: Communications and Multimedia Act to be amended. *The Star*. 04-09-19 <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2018/09/04/gobind-communications-and-multimedia-act-to-be-amended/>.

¹¹⁹ The perceived corruption by the previous government is an often mentioned reason why civic initiative members support PH.

¹²⁰ Interview. Male, 27 yrs. old. Member of Penang Forum and founder of Penang Hill Watch 20-02-19

to move forward. Civil society was focussed on getting BN out of office, but could not plan ahead after the victory.

‘New Malaysia’ in Penang

When discussing the implications of the governmental change on state level, civic initiative members are even more dissatisfied. Civic initiative members consider it problematic to have the same political party in federal office as in the state office. It becomes easier for the state to push policies through, as there is no check-and-balance by federal politics. When BN’s opposition won the Penang state elections in 2008, civic initiative members saw it as a victory for civil society. Ten years after this victory, most informants are rather cynical. The previously described institutionalisation of civil society had already occurred on a state level; Back then, many members of civic initiatives saw their activist friends ‘change’ after they became part of the state government. The Penang state politicians are described as arrogant and working mostly with businessmen. Civic initiative members currently see the same happening on a national level, noticing the similarities between the victories on federal and state.

An informant describes how Penang state government sees the federal governmental change as a support for their state policies:

“[The federal victory] has been misunderstood by [Penang] state representatives as an all-round support for the state to implement state projects. So now they're saying that the reason why they're doing the projects, it is because the people in the state have given them that mandate. In a sense of ‘you voted for us, so you are in favour of all our policies’.”¹²¹

In this perspective, the state government can claim citizen’s support and surpass the counter voice of civic initiatives. As such, many informants argued that even though Malaysia has a new federal government with according changes, Penang does not.

These perceptions on the governmental changes, on both federal and state level, have influenced the practices of civic initiatives, as civil society is quite intertwined with politics. Civic initiatives want to provide a voice for citizens, but simultaneously cooperate with the

¹²¹ Interview. Male, 27 yrs. old. Member of Penang Forum and founder of Penang Hill Watch 20-02-19

state government. By monitoring the state, court and development projects, they ‘help’ the state by giving them this information, not necessarily using it against them.

Conclusively, many informants argued that even with the initial euphoric moment of victory and the feeling of a ‘New Malaysia’, their role of providing checks and balances remains the same. Most civic initiatives had meetings after the elections to discuss their new role: “As soon as they announced it we had about fifteen meetings but about twenty briefing all together.” In general, most members of civil society acknowledge that actual change takes time and are still hopeful for a ‘New Malaysia’, understanding that it is not realistic to expect that by one election the mindset and practice of whole Malaysia can change. In the past year PH has made state practices even more complicated due to the institutionalisation of civil society, and thus the lack of checks of balances by the new federal government.

II. Penang state politics: differentiating views on modernity and development

Civic initiative members’ belief in positive change is an important reason to spend their time within civil society. There are certain issues that motivate participants to voice out and take a stand towards governmental development plans. Although most recognize the need to modernise in some direction, many oppose these plans because they argue that they are based on solely economic grounds, and not on sustainability.

Modernity and current development issues in Penang

Similar to young adults, civil society’s conceptualisation of what modernity entails, can be divided into intangible and tangible. The intangible definition among members of civil society contains a certain state of mind such as critical thinking. This involves respecting the lives of others regardless of their religion or culture. Thus, this view on modernity is also related to the fragmented character of Malaysia’s society.

The tangible definition is more literal and broadly contested among activist civil society and state government. The multiple large development plans that are planned or recently started do not resonate with the vision of those within civic initiatives, based on the costs, efficiency, local needs and long-term vision.

First, development agencies are rapidly constructing more luxurious condominiums on the island, build for those with higher incomes, investors and expats. Civic initiatives argue that government policy on these issues does not serve the needs of the population. Affordable housing becomes unavailable for those with a low income, such as young adults.

Second, the state government proposed many land reclamations projects to have more place for development. Civic initiatives argue that reclamations strongly affect the lives of Penang's fishermen. Members emphasise that it is more than income, but also that fishermen's culture and way of life will be eradicated. Participants that focus on environmental issues also warn for the effects that it will have on the surrounding marine life and biodiversity.

The third topic of concern is the Penang Transport Master Plan (PTMP), that will be financed by the profits of the land reclamations. Due to the overwhelming number of cars civic initiatives see how there is a need for a government plan, but strongly oppose PTMP that the state proposes as a solution. According to Penang Forum's transport expert, PTMP is made as a modern development plan, but will not be efficient and does not fit the needs of the people¹²².

The fourth common issue is heritage. In 2008, Georgetown got the official UNESCO World Heritage status. This status was largely a product of decades of effort from Penang's civil society, valuing the identity and local culture that comes with heritage buildings. Civic initiatives based on sustainable development and heritage argue that the state government is primarily interested in economic development, and does not protect heritage and local culture. They consider nature, specifically the hills and the sea of Penang, to be heritage as well.

This flows into the fifth issue, environment. Civic initiatives argue that Penang's development strongly affect its nature and environment. Especially in the hills, the fragmentation of nature affects the biodiversity and ecosystem. Overdevelopment is deemed of the major causes of 2018's landslides on a hillside construction site, that killed eleven people.¹²³

The way civic initiatives approach these development plans is generally from a perspective of sustainable development. Sustainable development is most often described as reducing environmental impacts of development (Goldin 2018, 103). In the context of Penang, the wish

¹²² Interview. Male, member of Penang Forum. Expert on Transport. 08-03-19

¹²³ Author unknown. Chronology of landslides in Penang since 2017. *The Sun Daily*. 20-10-18
<https://www.thesundaily.my/archive/chronology-landslides-penang-2017-DUARCH585459>

for sustainable development is motivated by environmental consequences but also by identity, culture and heritage. Thus, the definition of sustainable development should be broader than described in the literature. Moreover, it entails an intangible conceptualisation of modernity.

Civil society in relation to the Penang state government

As shown in the five major issues described above, there is a difference between the conceptualisation of modernity among members of civil society and that of state government. An activist on both federal and state level describes these development projects as an easy way to win votes:

“Build this trendy new project that will attract not only the locals, but attract tourists to have international attention [...] This is a really outdated way of winning people over. It has the assumption that that's why people are voting for them. That is how winning works. This is essentially politicians that want to win votes. So, I feel like, if anything, it is an ideological conflict. They think that this is what people want.”¹²⁴

The state's conceptualisation broadly fits the description of high modernism (Scott, 1998). In plans like PTMP, the state government designs a fixed course for Penang's future that are, as Scott describes, objectified by a series of preconceived goals. These plans are based on a technical and scientific version of modernity, whereas civic initiatives have other definitions of modernity, that are not against development plans, but strive for a more localized and sustainable way of development.

Civic initiatives have several different responses to five discussed issues. They try to create awareness among fellow citizens by organizing talks, social media outreach, publishing monthly magazines and produce audio-visual material. For example, one of the informants made a small documentary where he shows the effects of development on both Penang's hills and sea. Furthermore, they monitor activities of developers and the state, to create leverage on current and future issues, both to use as leverage on interactions with the government and to show to the public.

As with any group, civil society in Penang is not a homogenous group. The more traditional¹²⁵ and established civic initiatives in Penang have made a point of trying to protect Balik Pulau,

¹²⁴ Interview. Female, founder of #youthforbettertransport and Harapan Tracker. Active on both state and federal level of civil society. 06-03-19

¹²⁵ Traditional in the sense that it has more vertebrate structures, has mostly older members and has been active for a few decades.

a less developed rural part on the westside of the island, from overdevelopment. However, citizens of Balik Pulau have formed their own civic initiative. They want to bring more development and tourism to their area. The founder argued: “Balik Pulau shouldn’t be the victim of overdevelopment around Georgetown.” Nevertheless, they argue for protection of their environment as well by means of eco-tourism. While explaining their points of view, they argued that they are not politically motivated and respect both the state government and the members of civic initiatives.

Thus, there is a difference in conceptualisation of modernity between Penang’s civil society and the state government. They argue for an alternative to the ‘high modernist’ development scheme of the state, aiming for sustainable development. Additionally, civil society is not a homogenous group and although working together on good terms, they might not always agree on the right approach to all developmental issues. As citizenry is also never a homogenous group, creating a counter voice from the perspective of citizens remains problematic. Thus, questions arise on whose perspective civil society gives voice to in their effort and daily practices.

III. Fragmentation and national identity: Civil society as the voice of citizens?

Without exception, all participants describe Malaysia as a fragmented society. These factors such as race, education level, and differences in urban and rural or old and young, influence the voice and outreach that civic initiatives are able to give to citizens, young adults in specific.

Views on Malaysian identity

According to most informants, fragmentation and race in society is strongly influenced by federal politics. Civic initiatives argue that politicians, primarily parties BN and PAS, don’t shy away from using race as a foundation for their arguments in addressing issues to the public. Many informants point out that on a day to day basis race does not materialize in issues. However, due to politics it often becomes one, explaining why many citizens avoid speaking about politics among friends, family and work.

Penang provides a unique context within Malaysia; due to colonial history it has a Chinese majority and an urban setting. After independence, Chinese would generally work in the cities whereas Malay and Indian citizens would generally work and live in rural areas and estates. Thus, one's identity and vision for Malaysia is strongly dependent on in which part of Malaysia you were born. The following quote shows this realization of one of the informants:

“When I studied in Taiwan I realized that Malaysia is so different in different parts. So you had students, who are from the south of Malaysia nearby Singapore from a Chinese school majority. I am from a government school and you can see how they talk about Malaysia is completely different. [...] Penang is majority Chinese, so it is really different from other states where Chinese are not the majority. So how they think about Malaysia and how they have thoughts about the country is very different. And then I would have Taiwanese friends asking, are you from the same Malaysia as she is? We had two Penangites studying in the same school there and I realized that both of us always say how good our country is. What kind of food we have and how multicultural it is. But there is another friend from Malaysia that didn't say it that way, they said it in a very bad way. I started to observe how we talk about Malaysia. I told them we stopped using plastic bags but in other states we actually don't have that same progress. So the state initiatives are also different and then I realized Penang actually has a strong NGO scene. I think in 1960 already. So it maybe this also makes the feeling on the country or how we talk about the place. It is different”¹²⁶.

This perspective is shared widely among civic initiative members. They step away from the more essentialist ‘ethnic model’ used by certain politicians and shift their view towards an individual identity that is more based on smaller groups. Each group with their own ‘imagined’ descend. Regardless, most members of civil society still identify as Malaysian and justify their work and efforts within civic initiatives from their responsibility as citizens. Also multiple members describe their civic initiatives as a more multi-ethnic alternative to other, mostly religious groups that regularly do not focus on the same issues as civic initiatives in the population of this research.

Creating voice for Penangites

Civic initiatives aim to contribute to popular sovereignty, by voicing out for citizens and cooperating with the state government. They indirectly contribute to the principle of authority

¹²⁶ Interview. Female, 34 yrs. old, artist and activist. 17-03-19

of the state being sustained by the consent of the people (Bellamy 2014). This creates a shift from despotic to infrastructural power of the state, as decision making becomes embedded in civil society and accepted by the state's citizens (Mann 1984, 188). However, providing voice becomes increasingly complicated when a society is as fragmented as Malaysia's, and even more difficult when initiatives aim to give voice to all citizens, regardless of societal groups.

In regard to the composition of Penang's civic initiative, a younger member mentioned:

"I believe that segments of classes and rich poor, races really affect political parties. It is still more like races and religion within the political parties. Majority is based on that. So I believe races play a big role in the political area but civil society is quite multiracial in the Penang context. I'm not sure in the national context but Penang is quite multiracial. Quite a lot of civil society is elite based, quite a lot of highly educated."¹²⁷

That race is politicized is general knowledge, but the implications of race for civil society is debated. Especially members of the larger civic initiatives consider their group to be multiracial. However, all acknowledge that most members are elite-based and are highly educated. As a result, it is sometimes said by themselves or others, that members of civic initiatives do not represent all citizens in Penang. It is difficult to provide the same outreach for all different groups at the same time. This is even magnified by language, education and religion. Each ethnic group has their own high school, mostly based on religion, where they often do not interact with other groups until they start their studies or work. In contrary, religious groups¹²⁸ have thousands of volunteers and have a strong influence on their followers. Informants describe how religious leaders are often not very progressive in their political stands towards the government and civil society.

Some smaller civic initiatives become an exception, as they provide voice for all ethnicities. A particular civic initiative that opposes PTMP reached out to different ethnic groups than their own, with the idea that PTMP would similarly affect them. This initiative, that consists of mostly older Chinese citizens, reached out to a local mosque and members of this mosque joined their protest. This was considered to be a big deal by the initiating civic initiative member. The initiative reached out to a Tamil school for an event to raise climate change awareness¹²⁹. This school was then joined by a Muslim school, making an effort to

¹²⁷ Interview. Male, 26 yrs. old. Member Suaram. 21-02-19

¹²⁸ Churches, mosques, temples, but also larger community-overarching groups.

¹²⁹ A different, but connected group that will be discussed in chapter 5.

protest together. Therefore a joined effort was made by a Chinese initiative, a Tamil school and a Malay school.

With these practices and their conceptualisation of modernity, civic initiatives attempt to provide a voice for citizens. The goal is to communicate this voice to the government and other fellow citizens. More so, they communicate government plans to citizens. In a society as fragmented as Malaysia, providing voice for a broad group of citizens, can be challenging. Especially if society consists of many ethnicity-based groups. Whenever there is a discussion on politics or the will to go ‘forward’ as a country, fragmentation will always be a part of the conversation as it is such a fundamental part of Malaysian society.

IV. Participation of young adults in Penang’s civil society

“Anyone? Does anyone have any other ideas?”. The woman in front of the room frowns and takes another look through the room. In a room with about thirty people, the only sound comes from the two children playing in the back. A young woman tries to pay attention to the children by giving quick looks to her side, while at the same time trying to keep her attention on the conversation in the room. Some others stare at their phones. We have arrived in an old house just outside of the heritage neighbourhood of Penang Island. The white walls have little decoration, apart from some old magazine covers. The paint is starting to peel off. It is about 5pm already, and most of the attendees have been sitting on their folding chairs since the early afternoon. One of the more established NGOs of Penang has invited this group of relatively young people¹³⁰ at their headquarters to engage with the younger generation of activists in Penang. In the front of the room they have placed a whiteboard that gives an overview of the things they have discussed so far; it mentions social media and some upcoming events. The woman in front of the board tells the participants that she hopes that young people feel encouraged to use this space if they want to organize events. A young man in the back raises this hand. She nods at him and he stands up “no offence, but if you want us to use this space we need some essential basics, starting with solid, fast WIFI. If you don’t have that nobody will use this”. Some people nod their heads agreeing, while others look at their phones or quietly whisper. “Good, good, I will write that down”, she responds, happy that someone stood up with suggestions. “And, should we make a WhatsApp group all together?”. She raises her

¹³⁰ Some within the population of young adults (21-30).

eyebrows and looks through the room repeatedly. Nobody says anything, while the woman in the back gives another pencil to one of the children. After waiting for a while, she sighs and writes WhatsApp group under 'later' on the whiteboard. She gives another smile to attendees, "okay, shall we do a group picture"?¹³¹

This story describes a meeting at an older civic initiative that operates at state and federal level, illustrates certain challenges within Penang's civil society. This meeting is part of their current efforts to engage with more young adults, and attract them to civil society.

In facilitating young adults' voice, a certain level of participation by young adults is necessary. However, this proves to be difficult for civic initiatives to accomplish. There are several reasons that surface during discussions between informants on this topic; the first is education. The education system is described as ethnicity based, politicized and without teaching children any form of critical thinking. This nurtures an idea that politicians know how to govern and protect their best interest – thus fostering a paternalistic view on the state. From this stance comes the idea that activism is a bad thing, or even a bad word. This lives among civic initiatives as well, as a leader of a civic initiative actively denied being an activist and preferred descriptions like peaceful advocacy.

A second reason shared by informants is young adults' focus on financial security, a career and building a life. Because of the bad reputation of activism, young adults might think that it would harm their prospects for their future and career. In addition, work within a civic initiative is mostly on a volunteer basis and takes a lot of time. Thus, besides possible judgements from social surroundings, it might have a financial effect on young adults' life. As described by a member of Penang Forum: "I think a lot of young people look at it from a sense of "What is in it for me? If I don't see a need or necessity, I wouldn't want to voice out."'" The lack of young adults is often criticized by current activists. Young adults are not thinking for themselves and only want financial gain and security, is the general critique.

Participating in civil society

Older people, who are more established in life, are more likely to be active and participate in civil society. The fact that Penang provides this image is strongly influenced by fragmentation and taboos that discourage citizens to speak of racial issues or politics.

Young adults who are currently active in civil society give several reasons for doing this work:

¹³¹ Round table meeting at office NGO based in Penang, Malaysia. 20-02-19

“Penang Forum gave me that voice, the thing is, they are an NGO that has quite a leverage, on many issues and being part of them as I told you just now, being part of a collective group. With many people from diverse backgrounds, very academic backgrounds. Gives you that leverage to speak out on issues. It gives you a certain sense of credibility.”¹³²

In accordance with Weiss (2003, 3), if citizens join civic initiatives to voice their perspectives within a network of shared solidarity, they are able to represent their interests and collaborate across other groups. This is the case for both younger and older members of civil society. They all have a strong emphasis on the participation component of citizenship: they argue that to act as a full member of society contains more than voting and paying taxes. In a wish for a ‘New Malaysia’, they feel they cannot trust politicians to make actual change, as they believe change always comes from grassroots.

In search for young adults

Apart from this general answer of young adults not being active in civil society, there have been informants say that young adults are active, but they are not being reached by the more established civic initiatives. A common critique is that the way that civic initiatives work is too institutionalized and sometimes called ‘old fashioned’. Young adults would prefer a more cellular way of working and strongly rely on social media for any potential activist activities, as is also shown in the illustrative story. Another reason informants mention is that the young adults who are interested in making a change, feel like they can have more impact by going straight into politics. According an activist, this creates a void:

“Lots of the leading or the vocal younger people [of civil society] have gone into politics and now they are politicians. Then you create that void. I don't know, I think there needs to be some sort of rebranding in the way that people look at NGOs. Even calling it NGOs is like such an old way of operating.”¹³³

The younger adults who are active in civil society - mostly between the age of 30 to 35 - are highly educated and all have had experience either abroad or in Kuala Lumpur. In this

¹³² Interview. Male, 27 yrs. old. Member of Penang Forum and founder of Penang Hill Watch 20-02-19

¹³³ Interview. Female, founder of #youthforbettertransport and Harapan Tracker. Active on both state and federal level of civil society. 06-03-19

environment they have been exposed to a different approach to citizenship, politics and activism than in Penang. They all recognize this influences their views and some acknowledge that they might never had become part of civil society if it was not for this exposure. Similar experiences made older members also desire to make Penang a better place. The fact that these members of civil society were able to live or study abroad also fuels the idea of civil society being more elite based, as this is not affordable for those with lower incomes.

In conclusion, there is a void between young adults and civic initiatives which makes it difficult to provide a united voice towards the government, magnified by Malaysia's fragmented character. However, after GE14 there have been few developments between civic initiatives and young adults, as will be shown in the next chapter.

5. Young adults and civic initiatives: Case Climate Strike

Bart van Gils & Lisa Pijnacker



Figure 1: Gils, B. A.M. van & Pijnacker, L.S. Climate strike 15th of March 2019, Photograph taken by authors.

As described in the previous chapters, the interviewed young adults and activist civic initiatives do generally not interact with one another. 'New Malaysia' initially did not change this situation. The vast majority of young adults (still) gets discouraged to be politically active by parents and university, and civic initiatives were still reconfiguring their position after the elections. However, in the second and third month of our fieldwork, a small group made up of both young adults and civic initiative members formed a Penang-based activist network. This network, since May 2019 named '*Klimate Action Utara Malaysia (KAUM)*' attempts to raise awareness for climate change and promote sustainable practices, aiming to inform Penang's and Malaysia's citizens. In addition, KAUM addresses the negative effects of Penang's development projects on nature and climate - both towards citizens and the government on state and national level. Young adults are more focussed on global climate change per se and civic initiative members more on local development projects. Nevertheless, they both empower one another, striving for each other's goals.

Malaysia's first Climate Strike, Penang 15th of March 2019.

Do you think more people are going to show up?" The young woman in the beginning of her twenties takes a doubtful look over her shoulder at the university gates. On both sides of the university gates about fifteen intimidating looking university guards are lined up, all suited in dark blue police-like uniforms. The university seems to have gotten air of the climate strike protest, and placed more guards than the regular two.

One of the leaders of the protest opens the trunk of one of the cars that are parked in front of the gate. A colourful pile of signs appears. The evening before some of the students got together to make signs reading messages such as "Save Penang, save the world", "A better climate starts with you" and "We want green cities". By now the group consists of six people. While some are a bit worried about the guards, or are pandering if enough people might show up today, they gather around the car. The signs are handed out. Once the trunk is empty, it got slammed closed. The leader adjusts his bandana, looks around the group, and asks: "Are we ready?"

While crossing the busy street towards the university gate, many heads turn in our direction. Walking in a group and holding the protest signs is an unusual sight, by which we are clearly distinguished from other students walking to class. All take position on the pavement next to the gate, another group of students arrives, all equipped with a colourful signs.. Some female students start to call for attention of the passing cars. Pointing towards a sign "honk for climate". As the first cars press on their claxon, the girls call out in loud and high-pitched screams of celebration. Ten minutes later, a large group of civic initiative members joins the protest, most wielding signs related to development issues. With their arrival, the assembly got about sixty-headstrong. This Friday afternoon, Penang's first climate protest ever is about to become reality.

The mood slowly starts to become brotherly as the leader with his bandana starts initiating a few protest songs. As most of the lyrics of the songs are wrongly repeated, many protesters chuckle. The bandana man tries a few simpler yells. "What do we want?!" "Climate justice!", the students shout back. "When do we want it!?" he roars. "Now!" the group enthusiastically answer.

On the other side of the street, two police officers arrived. The demonstrators notice them, but the officers do not seem to make problems. After asking some questions to the man with the bandana, and noting down some names, the officers start managing the streets' traffic. Many civil society members are amazed by the ease of the situation. The protest can go on.

This climate strike, held on the 15th of March 2019, was the first activity of the new network. Many civic initiative members did not imagine such an event happening under the BN regime. Some young adults, before notoriously absent in physical involvement in activism, joined the protest, and even though the rally was not authorised by the local government, the police did not intervene, as apparently was the norm before. Instead, they were rather accommodating. On the other side, the large presence of university guards was understood as symbolic for the university's stance on this rally. Understanding the climate protest group as a new phenomenon in Penang and Malaysia within the context of political change, their manifestations are illustrative for the opportunities and limitations towards the accessibility of political participation and activism in 'New Malaysia'.

The formation of a network

Just before the first climate strike we met Zaka, Malay, almost-graduating biology student in his early twenties. Unlike most of his co-students, Zaka has been a vivid student activist. In previous years, he was part of a group of students that formed an unauthorised 'student union'. The group would organise rallies against the former government - for example, they organised an 'Imprison PM Najib' rally - and initiate activities in neighbourhoods helping those in need. Zaka looks somewhat nostalgically back on this period. "Once the police came to my door asking questions after we had to run", he told us amused. "My parents don't agree with my activism, I should focus on my career they say. So I don't tell them, they don't know".

As the other members of this 'student union' have graduated, he is the last member. New members were hard to get by; "most students are not interested in activism, and not everyone could be trusted", argued Zaka. He also noted more than once that "with the new government, student activism in general is a bit dead. We lost our purpose".

With the student union gone and the BN regime removed from power, Zaka decided to shift his focus to climate activism. In tandem with the global 'Climate Strikes' by 'Friday for Future', a movement started by the 16-year old Swedish Greta Thunberg, Zaka aims to educate his fellow students whilst attempting to get more students involved in activism, promoting a bottom-up approach to change Malaysia's society.

Although Zaka could not fall back on his former activist friends, he was not alone in his endeavour. He teamed up with an activist teacher who is strongly affiliated with sustainability issues. Together they made an effort to mobilize more students, and invited

civic initiative members who rally against development plans, to join this protest as well.

For civic initiatives this was an opportunity to strive for their causes from a different angle, create a wider outreach, and a chance to involve more young adults in their practices. Climate change can be understood as a suitable cause for this purpose, being less sensitive or controversial, not related to race, and thus not infringe on people's position or feelings. With instead a global context in mind, activities surrounding climate change are more accessible to join for young adults than protests specifically against the state's development plans. In return, the involvement of civic initiative members is highly valued; they provide moral support, advice, and useful connections. This initial connection between the members and students that met up during the climate protest formed a loose, informal coalition, effectively bound together by a WhatsApp group called 'Youth climate action' of which both researcher are also members.

In the weeks following the first climate strike, a small group of individuals met up to organize other activities. This task group, deemed to be the basis of KAUM, started with Zaka, the teacher, a Thai student, an elder Buddhist monk, an organic farmer and us, the researchers. Later other young adults and a teacher also became part of this group. Even though the civic initiative members were not involved in the organisation of the activities, they aided by providing feedback through WhatsApp messages.

Controversies

Proceeding after the first climate strike, one of the activities organised by KAUM was 'a day for climate'; an exhibition-like day with speeches, activities and performances *within* the university grounds, in order to inform as many students on climate change as possible. In a meeting, the group had to come up with a strategy to get the event through the cumbersome bureaucracy of the university administration. By avoiding the words 'protest', 'demonstration' or 'rally', the event was described as docile, non-political, and therefore deemed as suitable to be approved. The event was very depoliticized, actively avoiding being associated to the rally during the event's preparations. As such, the organisers successfully avoided getting into trouble with the university and possible consequences for their position as a student or teacher. This illustrates the limiting character of the university in regard to activism, as the university is still deemed as a place without space for political practices.

Not all further activities were non-political in its character, as Penang's second Climate Strike got into a political storm. The protest, taking place on the 24th of May 2019¹³⁶, was joined by a group of school children of a progressive elementary school that emphasises ecological sustainability in its curriculum, with their parents' permission and supervision of the school's head teacher. Reusing the signs from the first rally, some of these 9 to 11-year old children were holding signs with a message against state development plans. Media publications of this protest got to the attention of a city councillor on educational affairs, which questioned the school's legitimacy for involving the school children in the protest, and asked for an investigation. With plenty of advice from civic initiative members, KAUM drafted a press statement on their position, arguing that the event focussed on multiple causes, protesting against any form of action that would exaggerate global warming, and thus also the state's development plans. The issue got much media attention, and made the lead story on a prominent national news outlet¹³⁷. Following the political upheaval, the ministry of education clarified no further action would be taken against the school, children or KAUM.

Opportunities and limitations in New Malaysia

Prior to the elections, young adults were well aware of the large-scale activist movements rallying against the government. Movements such as *Bersih*¹³⁸, who strived for fairer elections seems to have had much popularity among interviewed young adults, but none would have seriously considered joining. Not participating in activism had become the norm as discussed in chapter 3 and 4. Thus, with 'New Malaysia', just one year after the change of government, a direct and large increase in young adults participating in political activism directly against the new government would have been unlikely. By a change of government, this stance does not immediately change. This is noticeable with the climate strikes; although most of the interviewed young adults were informed by friends, social media or activist lecturers, and most expressed support to the cause, only the initiator Zaka physically participated in the protest¹³⁹.

¹³⁶ This climate strike took place after we left the field. However, we stayed in touch with informants and are still part of their WhatsApp group, kept informed on the current processes.

¹³⁷ Predeep Nambiar. 2 NGO dibidas eksploitasi kanak-kanak sertai protes alam sekitar. FMT News. 31-05-19 <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/bahasa/2019/05/31/2-ngo-dibidas-eksploitasi-kanak-kanak-sertai-protes-alam-sekitar/>

¹³⁸ *Bersih* is a coalition of NGOs which seeks to reform the current electoral system in Malaysia to ensure free, clean and fair elections.

¹³⁹ Of the research sample of 22 informants.

In addition, the new political changes related to citizenship rights put in operation by PH are primarily institutional. Although the police did not break up the protests organised by KAUM, the university and the members of Penang city council did not express their support of the rally, which limits young adults' easy access to participate or organise activist events - based on experiences of previous protest groups¹⁴¹ and according the general perceptions of activists. Even though PH seems have instructed to stop the enforcement of participation restricting laws¹⁴², the culture of doing so by those who enforce it, has not (entirely) disappeared (yet).

On a more optimistic stance, young adults and civic initiative members alike are aware that there is more freedom in voicing out their opinions. We argue that what follows, is the experimentation of the new shifted boundaries by early adaptors, in urge of their message being heard. That can be a small group of young adults rallying for climate action, or civic initiatives who want to raise awareness for the negative issues of development. In this experimentation, both groups find one another, aiding in each other's goals.

The fact that young adults and civic initiatives have different objectives is not seen as an obstacle. As Zaka phrased it, "everyone has their own objectives. One is defending the rights of the fishermen, others trying to improve the bicycling culture, whereas others focus using less plastic". The climate protests created new connections between these usually separated groups. By having a very cellular, flexible structure, the network creates new opportunities for future cooperation. By working together under a common banner, all actors stand stronger.

In coherence with theory (Appadurai 2006; Harris 2010) , this more cellular structured network of the climate group might be more suited for young adults' participation than the more vertebrate, institutionalized exciting civic initiatives that operate in Penang. With space for young adults to rally for what they themselves believe in, regardless of the stance of co-activists. As participating becomes a less politically stigmatized engagement, it creates a more accessible setting for young adults.

In accordance to that, we can argue that climate change (Goldin 2018, 103) has widened the debate on the definition, valuation and consequences of development. We argue that

¹⁴¹ It is generally known that other students activists from previous generations have been warned or expelled after similar activities. This is also supported by statements of multiple informants of Penang's civil society.

¹⁴² Author unknown. Look beyond 'first 100 days' to the deeper reforms achieved, says Kit Siang. The Star. 21-08-19. <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2018/08/18/look-beyond-first-100-days-to-the-deeper-reforms-achieved-says-kit-siang/>

climate change activism transcends borders and fosters a more global sense of citizenship, referring to the components of belonging, rights and participation (Bellamy 2014). Whilst belonging to a global community, advocating for the right to have a sustainable future, one participates for the purpose of all inhabitants of the world. In regard of Malaysia, the global issue of climate change transcends Malaysia's identity politics, and thereby the problematics of fragmentation that limits young adults' participation and engagement.

Thus, the efforts of this network of young adults and civic initiatives show us some of the first consequences of 'New Malaysia' in the local context of Penang. Although limitations are still in place, the elections created new opportunities to protest in general and a new space for Malaysian citizens to explore. The members of the climate protest group are not the only early adaptors exploring the new boundaries of Malaysia's citizenship; a new activist group in Kuala Lumpur is advocating for the perspectives of young adults¹⁴³, citizens are more outspoken on the internet on issues they care about¹⁴⁴, and journalists are less self-censoring themselves than before¹⁴⁵. Time will show us if this trend continues and holds stand.

¹⁴³ Malaysia Muda focuses on the platform of language and critical pedagogy to advance its ideals of consciousness, national unity and progressive nation building.

¹⁴⁴ See chapter 3.

¹⁴⁵ Based on 3 Interviews with Penang-based journalists of 'progressive' newspapers, and a gathering with free-lance journalists.

Conclusion

In this conclusion we will show our most important findings in how they relate to the literature. Furthermore, we will provide an answer to our main research question and make recommendations for future research. Fuelled by hopes and aspirations of Malaysian citizens, the results of GE14 provided a break from history and a starting point to redefine citizenship and progress for the nation-state: create a 'New Malaysia'. This provides a context to analyse political engagement and perspectives on modernity in a nation-state that is characterized by fragmentation.

Modernity, development and authoritarianism

First, 'New Malaysia' as a case study sheds light on the contradictions of the development discourse. This discourse argues for 'good governance', accountability and popular sovereignty as a condition for development (Robinson 2007, 12). Instead, we argue that 'good governance' and development seem to corrupt one another. Although Malaysia's regime change entailed a shift towards good governance on federal level, this did not occur on state level; civic initiatives point out that the state prioritises development over good governance, which should empower civil society's voice. 'New Malaysia' rather decreased the voice of Penang's civil society by the state's legitimization due to the electoral mandate, and the institutionalisation of civic initiatives.

The disparity between federal and state governments' stances, but even more the way young adults and civic initiatives imagine a modern Malaysia, exemplifies Wagner's argument (2012) on the existence and problematics of multiple conceptualisations of modernity. Demonstrated by the case of young adults, and to some extent also civic initiatives, we can distinguish ideologies of modernity in tangible and intangible conceptualisations. Young adults' intangible conceptualisation - referring to that 'the way of thinking' of Malaysia's citizens should change in line with Scott's conceptualisation of 'high modernism' (1998) - becomes a condition for them to experience 'progress'. The common remark that 'Malaysia is not ready for change', underlines this idea. In this sense, young adults view tangible development as a second priority over the former.

More specific, James Scott's argues that states strive for modernisation in a high modernist ideology, characterized by self-confidence in scientific and technical progress,

attempting ‘to master (human) nature in creating a rational design of social order’ (1998, 4). Young adults’ desire for a high modernist thinking society shows us that a high modernist ideology can live among citizens as well. However, according to young adults, this does not necessarily needs to be expressed in large-scale development plans, but rather as an aspired modern value system of their fellow citizens.

Furthermore, civic initiatives share Scott’s argument of ‘high modernism’ (1998, 4) in their perception of Penang’s state apparatus, rallying for sustainable development instead. Thus, we argue that a state’s high modernist ideology can get contested by citizens, as is shown by the practices of civic initiatives. .

Nation and diversity

Second, Anthony Smith’s argues in his ethnic model of the nation, that the nation’s population shares a common history and public culture, accompanied with equal legal rights and duties (1991). This model does not resonate with the reality of Malaysia’s society, wherein fragmentation divides the nation into groups with different needs and interests. We argue that creating a course for the future, a pathway towards progress and modernity gets problematized by societal fragmentation. The state tries to unite these groups by their credo ‘unity in diversity’ and thus following Benedict Anderson’s constructivist model (2006). Young adults and civic initiatives¹⁴⁷ desire the nation to be perceived in constructivist model of national identity. Whereas the state applies a constructivist narrative with ‘unity in diversity’, it practices an ‘essentialist’ ethnic citizenship regime. This simultaneous use of contradicting national identity models frustrates young adults, as one model entails their idea of progress, the other got perceived as the stance of the former ‘rejected’ BN government.

Furthermore, also within young adults fragmentation happens. There is disagreement on how their aspirations towards a modern value system should happen; what cultural values to preserve, which geographical regions should change and who or what should be taken for example. Young adults’ desire to change the character and identity of their society towards a high modernist value system, underlines the argument of Yuval-Davis (2006). Yuval-Davis argues that the association with a national identity is strongly related to the near-future, rather than seeing identity as a stable state. As such, we argue that young adults’ envisionment of the Malaysian national identity is closely related to their desired ‘progress’ towards

¹⁴⁷ This was explicitly expressed by young adults, but supported by stances of members of civic initiates

modernisation of the nation, and thus explaining the contradiction of how they describe the Malaysian identity and want the Malaysian society to become.

Also civic initiatives experience problems with fragmentation; it is hard to create a united front towards the state, as they want to represent, and create a counter voice for the society as a whole, and not one specific ethnicity or religious group. This gets further problematised by civic initiative members' background, which is often upper class, highly educated, which causes them to represent a certain group within society, regardless of their attempts to reach out to other groups.

Thus, fragmentation problematizes not only setting a united course to modernise the nation-state, but as well for citizens and civil society. In regard to the federal regime change of GE14, it had a dual effect. On one hand it created space for infrastructural power and popular sovereignty, enabling the multiplicity of fragmented ideas on modernity within society to be heard, not stifled by authoritarianism. On the other hand, the multiplicity of modernities leads to further polarisation rather than uniting the nation in a common envisionment of 'New Malaysia'.

Citizenship and engagement

Third, in our theoretical framework Vink (2017, 2) argues citizenship gets shaped by a top-down enforcement of a state's 'citizenship regime'. This contrasts with Bloemraad and Ramakrishnan (2008, 286), who argue that citizenship can be formed by bottom-up 'civic activism'. Civic initiatives have a strong influence on Malaysian politics shown by the intertwinement of PH and civil society, which resulted in two victories on federal and state levels. Simultaneously, Malaysia's citizenship regime *Bumiputra*, which dictates the citizenship components rights and belonging, did not change as a result of Malaysia's civil society induced regime change. Thus, we argue that citizenship takes shape through interactions between the state and civil society.

The institutionalisation of civil society after the electoral victories fits the argumentation of Lang (2013, 74). Civil society members that became part of the state government traded their outsider for insider status and enter career tracks in political institutions. Lang argues that politicians are generally still supporting their former group's agendas and goals. However, according to civic initiatives members, politicians adjust to their new surroundings by following an economic development course instead of the sustainable alternative proposed by their former civic initiatives. As a consequence, former strict lines between state and civil society as some parts of civil society become full members of

institutionalised systems. Consequently, the deciding power on citizenship becomes increasingly more blurred.

Regarding Bellamy's (2014) participation component, we argue that existing societal structures can limit political engagement. Regardless of the intentions by the state, societal structures, such as cultural taboos, habits and normative expectations, discourages students and young adults to be activist in a public setting. Furlong and Cartmel (2007) and Harris (2010, 12) describe young adults as apathetic, uninterested and non-participatory towards political issues. However, young adults in Penang demonstrate less public, less activist ways of participating. Thus, as more private participation is less visible for academics, media or civic initiatives members, get misunderstood for not participating or engaging with politics. Both non-activist young adults and exceptional young adults, who have joined activist civic initiatives, find their motivation for participating in heterogeneous ways in the common wish to create voice and outreach for the perspectives. Thus, Weiss' argument is limiting in the sense that young adults must join collectives for voice. The different ways of participating are less homogenous in the context of Penang. Furthermore, the example of the climate strike illustrates that with regime changes, citizens could explore changing societal structures that both limits and provide opportunities for political participation.

Defining 'New Malaysia'

The meaning of 'New Malaysia' is aligned with a general wish for positive change. As such, we argue that the concept of 'New Malaysia' is used by many as a metonym for positive political change, with an emotional attachment linked to the idea of progress and modernity for both young adults and members of civic initiatives. Although elections have a considerable influence on creating change within a nation-state, an actual change has to be supported by society. Thus, becomes reality only when combining institutional changes and societal changes.

The actual change of government opens new opportunities for such ideologised change, but simultaneously holds on to existing limiting structures. Taking into account that the impact of installing a new government after BN's 61 year rule is considerable to begin with, the institutional changes such as the abolishment of some authoritarian laws does have meaningful consequences for Malaysia's citizens. With the multiple conceptualisations of

progress among Malaysia's citizenry and political parties, they generally do contain components of 'good governance'. By abolishing these authoritarian laws and installing a new government, new spaces have been created in society as well. This consists of space to oppose governmental plans without major consequences, thus to participate within an active form of citizenship. This space can be used in the traditional manners of civic initiatives or the more private forms of participation as shown by young adults. Changes are confined for now by fragmentation in their vision forward, although the connections made in regard to the climate action illustrates an exception to this fragmentation, as well as first insights to the use of new spaces for participation after GE14. If Malaysians are able to formulate a more common view on progress, the 'New Malaysia' they envision has the possibility to become a reality.

Limitations and recommendations

Although this research provides us interesting insights in Malaysia's new political situation, the implications of the governmental change became only recently notable. Future research will be necessary to understand if the changes of 'New Malaysia' will sustain. Analysing this case-study with the same or other populations would further shed light on the influence of societal fragmentation and consequential polarisation whilst a nation-state is shifting towards a regime of popular sovereignty.

Furthermore, due to time limitations this research only entailed university-educated young adults and multi-ethnic civic initiatives in Penang, thus limiting the scope on which statements can be made on young adults and civic initiatives in general, particularly in the context of Malaysia. Only few young adults and none civic initiative members took very protective stances towards their religion and ethnicity, which we expect to be more present in the non-researched groups.

Taking these limitations and opportunities for further research in consideration, we hope to have succeeded in exposing the problematics and opportunities of political change in fragmented societies, encountered by young adults and civic initiatives. After getting to understand their hopes and aspirations for the future of their nation, we can only hope they will succeed in creating their 'New Malaysia'.

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