WHY YOUNG MALAY VOTERS IN MALAYSIA ARE "TURNING GREEN"

Syaza Shukri

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FOREWORD

The economic, political, strategic and cultural dynamism in Southeast Asia has gained added relevance in recent years with the spectacular rise of giant economies in East and South Asia. This has drawn greater attention to the region and to the enhanced role it now plays in international relations and global economics.

The sustained effort made by Southeast Asian nations since 1967 towards a peaceful and gradual integration of their economies has had indubitable success, and perhaps as a consequence of this, most of these countries are undergoing deep political and social changes domestically and are constructing innovative solutions to meet new international challenges. Big Power tensions continue to be played out in the neighbourhood despite the tradition of neutrality exercised by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- There is an increasing trend among young Malay voters in Malaysia to support the Perikatan Nasional coalition, with a particular emphasis on the Islamist party PAS.
- Despite recognition of the weak economy as a significant national concern, young Malay voters continue to place a higher emphasis on Muslim leaders who assert their commitment to safeguarding the rights of Islam in Malaysia.
- Consistent with theories on political socialization, the influence of family members significantly affects young Malay voters in Malaysia, particularly due to their limited political awareness of alternative channels like formal schooling.
- Young Malay voters acknowledge the significant impact of social media and TikTok, particularly in how these shape the voting patterns of their peers. They nevertheless maintain a perception of their own impartiality in this regard.
- Interestingly, the influence of Islamic institutions, with their own educational philosophy, on the political behaviour of Malay youth is minimal, as their political ideas are already shaped by their early experiences.

Why Young Malay Voters in Malaysia Are "Turning Green"

By Syaza Shukri[1]

INTRODUCTION

In July 2019, the Malaysian Parliament passed a constitutional amendment to lower the voting age from 21 to 18 years. Known as Undi18, this legal reform symbolized the recognition of the youth's voice in shaping the nation's future (Azril 2019). This amendment, which also included automatic voter registration, was met with resounding bipartisan support, passing with a rare unanimous endorsement.

Undi18 was a long-awaited opportunity for political empowerment and active citizenship among the young. A resurgence of youth-led activism (Karunungan 2021) saw young Malaysians becoming more vocal and engaged in political discourse, with various youth-led movements and NGOs leading awareness campaigns to educate young voters about their rights and the importance of informed voting (Loheswar 2021; Weiss 2022). This upsurge in political awareness also led to increased scrutiny and expectations from political parties, who were prompted to address the concerns of this new voter demographic. The parties soon felt compelled to recalibrate their strategies and manifestos to appeal to younger voters, especially via social media (*The Star*, 7 August 2023).

This energetic participation by Malaysian youths may have ushered in a new era of political engagement and reform, though it is not certain in what shape or form.

Youth-led activism in Malaysia dates from the early years of the nation. The 1960s through to the 1980s marked a significant period of youth activism. University students became highly involved in protests that targeted prevailing social and political issues, with movements such as the Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement (Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia, ABIM) playing a prominent role. Other campus organizations that integrated Islamic principles with modern governance and social welfare were the Islamic Republic and Darul Arqam, while Jamaat Tabligh was involved in grassroots religious rejuvenation through personal outreach and communal religious activities (Zainah 1987). In addition to student youth movements, some Islamic revivalism in Malaysia partly resulted from *dakwah* (Islamic missionary) activities that sought to rekindle Islamic identity and piety among Malaysian youths outside of academic settings. In a similar vein, the conservative turn among Malay youths today stems from activities outside of university campuses.

In the late 1990s, the *Reformasi* movement surged, bolstered by a substantial contribution from the youth. This period was characterized by a vigorous outcry against corruption and a strong push for political reforms. Despite government suppression, Malaysian civil society rose as a pivotal force in socio-political activism thanks in no small part to initiatives such as Bersih, which campaigned for free and fair elections. The 2010s saw the continuation of this trend, with the political engagement of Malaysian youths diversifying and intensifying, especially during the premiership of Najib Razak which saw increasing awareness of corruption issues. Youth activists leveraged various platforms, including social media, to champion their initiatives—a notable example being the Undi18 movement.

An example of a youth leader is Adam Adli, a prominent youth activist known for his vocal stance on democracy and human rights issues. His journey as a youth leader began to gain significant attention around 2011 when, as a university student, he boldly lowered a flag bearing the image of the Malaysian prime minister from a building, replacing it with a banner that called for academic freedom and political reform.

This act of defiance marked his entry into public consciousness and positioned him as a symbol of youth resistance against the government. In 2022, he became the Deputy Minister of Youth and Sport under the administration of Anwar Ibrahim, after winning his first parliamentary election. The persistent activism and advocacy for change shaped the general expectation that Malaysian youth would naturally adopt more progressive viewpoints.

However, the recent inclination of Malaysian youth—specifically the Malays—towards supporting organizations such as the Islamist Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS) has somewhat challenged this expectation. With the colour green typically used in historical and modern Islamic symbolism, including as the backdrop for PAS' flag, the shift in support of conservative political parties is considered as "turning green" in this article. Instead of focusing on social conservatism dealing with the preservation of traditional social values and norms, this article is mostly interested in political conservatism and in the maintenance of traditional forms of governance and resistance to radical change. In Malaysia, this relates to the special position of Malay identity and Islam in politics and administration, which is championed by parties such as PAS and UMNO.

This tilt towards conservatism in Malay youths has been unexpected; conventional wisdom has suggested that younger voters would gravitate towards parties advocating for liberal and progressive reforms (Parker, Graf, and Igielnik 2019). Although long-term political attitudes are steady, young people tend to be liberal, and liberals are more likely to become conservatives only as they age, rather than vice versa (Peterson et al. 2020). Instead of uniformly aligning with progressive parties that champion liberal changes, a significant portion of young people appear to be swayed by the narratives and community ties nurtured by parties that prioritize Islamic values and governance, such as PAS. One of the key factors contributing to this shift is the Islamization process (Liow 2009; Abbott and Gregorios-Pippas 2010) which was egged on by the rivalry between UMNO and PAS. This competition heightened the emphasis on Islamic identity, including in education. Islamic education became more prominent in the national curriculum into tertiary education; this has made it a possible factor to be discovered in this research. These trends

add complexity to the evolving nature of youth engagement in politics and signal the need to appreciate the nuanced motivations that drive their political alignment.

Based on data from the 15th General Elections (GE15), the news portal Malaysiakini reported that among young voters, Perikatan Nasional (PN), a coalition of which PAS is a part, appeared as the clear winner in 46 per cent of polling districts. This was particularly the case in Malay-majority areas in peninsular Malaysia (Malaysiakini 2023). This result clearly reflects the trend among Muslim youths observed through surveys conducted by Merdeka Centre before the elections. In the Muslim Youth Survey (Merdeka Centre 2022a), more than 65 per cent of respondents agreed that Muslims should only vote for Muslim leaders and that only Muslims are allowed to be prime ministers. In another poll by Merdeka Centre, upholding Islam was the top factor—at 26 per cent—that would encourage youths to support a party (Merdeka Centre 2022b).

Concurrently, Malaysia has witnessed demographic shifts, particularly in its non-Malay—especially Chinese—populations (*Malay Mail*, 21 January 2017). Two significant trends are: a lower birth rate among non-Malay communities compared to their Malay counterparts; and a higher rate of emigration among non-Malays, many of whom seek better opportunities and a more inclusive environment abroad. As the demographic balance shifts, political and social policies increasingly shift as well to cater to the majority's preferences, further entrenching Islam's role in shaping national identity and policy. This dynamic can lead to a feedback loop, where increased Islamic conservatism contributes to non-Malay emigration, which in turn accelerates the focus on Islamic identity, potentially undermining Malaysia's multicultural fabric.

This phenomenon can be attributed to a complex interplay of cultural, educational, and religious factors that resonate deeply with the identities of young Malays. PAS has successfully tapped into the values and aspirations of these individuals by emphasizing Islamic principles and governance, social justice, and anti-corruption. In other words, the youths have become more conservative, or turned "green". PAS' effective use of social media and grassroots campaigns has also engendered a sense of community and belonging among youths, which can be particularly appealing following the confusion felt during the COVID-19

pandemic. This trend has prompted political observers to reconsider the multidimensional nature of youth political engagement in Malaysia and the specific issues and values that mobilize this demographic, in light of global shifts in youth dissatisfaction with democracy (Foa et al. 2020).

AGENTS OF POLITICAL SOCIALIZATION

The literature on political socialization often starts with seminal work from theorists like Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba (1963), who in their pioneering study, *The Civic Culture*, explore the cultural aspects of political socialization, arguing that political attitudes and behaviours are largely influenced by cultural norms and values. Additionally, the theory of political socialization has been expanded by Easton and Dennis (1969), emphasizing the role of early childhood experiences and family in shaping political identity. Another critical theoretical perspective comes from social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1979), which explains political socialization through the lens of group identity and intergroup relations, suggesting that political affiliations and attitudes can be influenced by the desire for positive social identity.

A primary domain of research within political socialization is identifying and understanding the agents responsible for the process. The literature identifies several key agents, including families, educational institutions, peer groups, media and political parties. Family, as the earliest and often most influential agent, plays a crucial role (Jennings and Niemi 1968). The family serves as the primary incubator for the transmission of political norms and beliefs, where children's earliest understanding of authority and civic responsibility are fostered. This microcosm reflects wider societal values, often embedding a sense of political identity and partisan leanings even before individuals fully grasp the complexities of political systems.

Schools and educational institutions also play a significant role, not only in imparting civic knowledge but also in shaping political attitudes and participation through curricula and extracurricular activities (McFarland and Starmanns 2009). However, there is a growing body of literature that outlines significant limitations to the effectiveness of education in this regard. One of the primary critiques is the purported

neutrality of the educational curriculum regarding political issues. Hess and McAvoy (2015) argue in favour of deliberation and engagement with contentious political issues; this is to minimize the likelihood of students leaving school with a superficial understanding of politics and lacking the ability to critically engage with complex political debates.

The burgeoning influence of the wider information ecosystem, particularly digital and social media, challenges the educational system's role in political socialization. Bennett and Segerberg (2012) discuss the shift towards personalized content consumption and its role in shaping social movements and advocacy organizations. The role of media as an agent has evolved significantly with the advent of digital and social media, with research examining the impact of news consumption patterns and social media engagement on political knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours (Kahne and Middaugh 2012). Media, in its various forms, then acts as a pervasive and powerful intermediary, reinforcing or challenging familial and socially held views, rapidly transmitting information, and shaping the discourse around political events and actors. Through its narrative power, the media contributes to the formation of public opinion and can either bolster or undermine democratic processes.

Among the multiple factors identified, religion, family, and media are fundamental agents in shaping political consciousness. Religion provides a structured and community-based framework through which moral lenses and ideological perspectives are imparted, and religious institutions often advocate for policy positions or societal norms that correlate with their doctrines; their influence on individual and collective political attitudes can be profound (Wald and Calhoun-Brown 2018; Norris and Inglehart 2011). In essence, the interwoven institutions of family, media, and religion play an instrumental role in determining the political fabric of society by deeply influencing the political socialization process from childhood through adulthood.

METHODOLOGY

This study aims to dissect and understand the multitude of factors that influence voting decisions among Malay youths. James Chai (2023) published an article entitled *Young Hearts and Minds: Understanding*

Malaysian Generation Z's Political Perspectives and Allegiances.
While he analysed the various political affiliations of younger
voters in Malaysia, this present research focuses instead on political
conservatism among Malay youths in Islamic universities. As a result
of attending an Islamic university, students are exposed not only to
Islamic education but also to an Islamic environment that may or may
not reinforce certain conservative ideas, such as the Islamic concept of
political leadership.

Therefore, a pivotal question centres on factors shaping the political
decisions of young Malay voters between the ages of 18 and 26 currently
attending Islamic universities. To explore this inquiry, the study hosted
focus group discussions (FGDs) with a total of thirty-five participants
in five separate sessions, who were students from three public Islamic
universities: the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM),
Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM) and Universiti Sultan Zainal
Abidin (UniSZA). These universities were chosen because they are
publicly funded Islamic universities and are located in different parts
of the country. The demographic split of the participants included
fifteen males and twenty females, ensuring a relatively balanced gender
perspective in the discussions. There were representatives from all the
states in Malaysia except Perlis. The thirty-five respondents also have
varied educational backgrounds including from the social sciences,
STEM and Islamic studies. Kicking off from 17 November 2023 until
4 April 2024, these FGDs delved into the personal experiences and
perceptions that contribute to the participants' political engagement and
choices.

IIUM, USIM and UniSZA are three public universities in Malaysia
with a distinctive environment and mission of integrating empirical and
revealed knowledge. The philosophy for IIUM states that "Knowledge
acquired through human reasoning to the neglect of revelation would be
incomplete and would not be beneficial to mankind" while the philosophy
for USIM is "The integration of *Naqli* (revealed) and *'Aqli* (rational)
knowledge and virtues are the bedrock of an outstanding generation and
knowledgeable society." UniSZA's philosophy is similar; it seeks the
"Integration of Islamic and Contemporary Excellence for the benefit of
the Ummah". This project will facilitate a multifaceted understanding of

Islamic conservatism among Malaysian youths by combining research on Islamic universities and Malay youths.

Due to the sensitivity of the subject, convenience sampling was used as the sampling technique. It was anticipated that only individuals who felt at ease discussing their political leanings would consent to participate in the FGDs. This was not a problem because the purpose of the study was to comprehend the leanings of Malay youth voters rather than to generalize about Malaysian youths. With the approval of the IIUM Research Ethics Committee (ID No: IREC 2023-203), anonymity is guaranteed throughout the reporting process.

WHY YOUTHS SUPPORT CONSERVATIVE PARTIES

Politics as a Religious Obligation

In Malaysia, a significant youth demographic maintains a conservative political stance, a phenomenon deeply intertwined with the pre-eminent role of Islam within the nation. This conservative leaning in politics is not merely a reflection of personal or traditional preferences; it emanates from a profound religious conviction that guides every aspect of life, including political decisions. The emphasis on religion as a cornerstone of governance and societal norms was highlighted by one participant of the FGD: "Because our country, when it comes to religion … We really [emphasize] our religion."[2] This underscores the pervasive influence of Islam on the political and societal framework, cementing a conservative outlook as a foundational aspect of governance.

Another poignant example of how religion influences political participation is the belief that voting is not only a civic duty but also a religious one. One individual expressed, "So, I think if we don't vote, there will be sin. And if we vote the wrong person, [it] will be sin. So, it's better to vote for the right person".[3] This statement underscores a

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[2] Personal communication, 15 December 2023.

[3] Personal communication, 22 December 2023.

deeper sentiment prevalent among young Malaysians: voting transcends mere political participation and enters the realm of moral obligation. The fear of sinning through inaction or incorrect action may motivate youths towards political conservatism, as it is perceived as a safer path that aligns with religious tenets. A participant claimed, "[Even if] the leader is not a Muslim, but his work is good, I will still not choose him. Because in the Quran, it says, if you want to choose a leader, choose the Muslim".[4] This person is most likely referring, for example, to Surah Ali 'Imran verse 28, among others (Mujar 2009).

When considering the influence of religion on political behaviour, it is evident that there exist multiple interpretations, dogmas and discourses about Islam in Malaysia. For example, Ahmad Fauzi and Che Hamdan argued that during the 2022 General Elections, four doctrinal categories of Malay-Muslims were identified, including ASWAJA (Ahlusunnah wal Jama'ah, or orthodox Sunni) traditionalists, Salafi reformists, Salafi conservatives, and neo-traditionalists (Ahmad Fauzi and Che Hamdan 2023). The influence of Salafism is evident in the growing prominence of Salafist thought among Malay-Muslims, partly due to the global resurgence of Salafism and its propagation through modern means of communication, and funding from the Gulf states. Salafi conservatives have contributed to a more literalist interpretation of Islam, emphasizing strict adherence to the Sunnah and the Quran. This has led to increasing conservatism and religiosity among Malay-Muslims, impacting issues ranging from dress codes to the implementation of Islamic law. The growing appeal of Salafism to young Malay-Muslims poses a dilemma for political actors and the state, which must balance between maintaining religious harmony and accommodating the rising Salafist influence.

Moreover, many young Malays view political engagement through the lens of Islamic teachings, believing it to be their responsibility to implement systems that reflect these principles. As one participant claimed, "It is our responsibility because we are not using what Islam

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[4] Personal communication, 15 March 2024.

has taught us, which is the system *shura*, the Quran".[5] Such sentiments reveal a collective aspiration to align governance with Islamic teachings, further rooting political conservatism among the young.

Fears concerning political leadership diverging from Islamic principles also galvanize this conservative stance. The apprehension is succinctly captured: "The worst-case scenario is, not the Muslim majority govern this country. Later, we already see that in the past, before the backdoor government … it's like a dark side of history in Malaysia".[6] The respondent was commenting on the short-lived Pakatan Harapan (PH)-led government from 2018 until 2020 which fell partly due to rising sentiments of Islam being under threat (Syaza 2021) and the resultant power struggle among parties within the governing coalition. These concerns are not just about leadership but are deeply entwined with maintaining an Islamic identity at the nation's core. The young's inclination towards conservatism is also fuelled by a reluctance to support political parties perceived to be divergent from Islamic values. This hesitancy is encapsulated by one participant who said, "So, if you are a Muslim, you don't dare to vote for PH. You don't dare to vote for Barisan Nasional [BN]".[7] The litmus test for political support, thus, becomes how closely a party's values align with Islamic teachings.

The political conservatism of Malay youths is not just a matter of preference but a complex interplay of religious convictions, societal expectations and historical experiences. Islam, as the guiding light in their lives, significantly shapes their political ideologies and choices, emphasizing a conservative approach that aligns with Islamic principles and teachings.

Family Influence Stronger Than Peers'

Youths in Malaysia exhibit a notable trend towards political conservatism, a phenomenon that can be attributed to the influence of family members,

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[5] Personal communication, 17 November 2023.

[6] Personal communication, 17 November 2023.

[7] Ibid.

often outweighing the impact of their peers. This conservatism is not inherently about aligning with traditional conservative political ideologies but leans more towards reluctance or caution in expressing political ideologies aggressively or exploring beyond the (religious) beliefs inherited from their families.

One of the critical reasons for this trend is the neutral or apolitical stance taken by many young individuals' circles of friends. A participant remarked, "Like my circle [of friends], they don't really, let's say, I'm not so sure, they don't really like to express themselves [on politics]. They're not really on a side; they're very neutral, they just don't care".[8] This statement reflects a broader trend where peer groups, which could be sources of diverse opinions and a platform for challenging existing beliefs, instead often adopt a passive stance towards politics to maintain harmony in their circle of friends. This neutrality among peers does not encourage questioning or deviating from familial political beliefs.

Moreover, the influence of family over friends in shaping political views is explicitly acknowledged by the participants. Another individual noted, "So, they [friends] already have their understanding. But somehow it contradicts with our understanding obviously, but the way they see it, they don't see it politically, they are influenced by family".[9] This highlights a clear distinction between political perceptions among friends and the deeper, more influential understanding rooted in family upbringing. Due to potential contradictions in beliefs between friends, familial influence remains dominant in the political attitude of this group of Malay youths. Even when they acknowledge some of their friends may be informed on politics, they still choose to get advice and opinions from older family members. The reason given is, "They [older family members] understand more, because they have worked … they are part of the larger economic system".[10]

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[8] Personal communication, 15 December 2023.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Personal communication, 15 March 2024.

The depth of family influence on political conservatism among Malay youths is also encapsulated in observations about families with strong political leanings. It is said that, "When people come from a very political family then they all have their own stance".[11] This fact points to the legacy of political beliefs passed down within families, enabling a continuity of political conservatism. This familial influence can create an environment where young individuals feel either compelled or naturally inclined to adopt and advocate for the political stance prevalent within their households: "I think it was mainly because of family pressure. Because, yeah, basically like my head of the family, my grandpa … At first, I didn't really bother with elections because for me politicians are all the same."[12] This highlights the significant role that family dynamics and pressures play in shaping political opinions and actions. The speaker's initial disinterest in politics is overturned primarily by familial expectations, underscoring how family structures and the opinions of respected elders can overshadow personal apathy towards political processes.

Additionally, the reluctance to explore unfamiliar political territories is attributed to familial influence, particularly in regions with pronounced political inclinations. An example is provided through the statement, "I think that we are brought from our family ... I think if we were to talk about Kelantan, they are afraid to, I'm not saying afraid, they don't want to go out of that bubble."[13] Interestingly, such observation was also shared by participants from Terengganu who were also studying in UniSZA about the sense of community within the state being tied to a specific political party. This suggests a broader scenario where familial traditions and beliefs significantly shape the political ideologies of the youth, discouraging the exploration of political ideologies or oppositional views.

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[11] Personal communication, 15 December 2023.

[12] Personal communication, 4 April 2024.

[13] Personal communication, 15 December 2023.

In summary, the political conservatism observed among Malay youths is deeply rooted in familial influences. Their political leaning is marked less by an active alignment with conservative politics and more by a reluctance to challenge or diverge from familial political beliefs, a trend reinforced by the apolitical or neutral stance of their peer groups.

Role of Social Media in Attracting Youths to Specific Parties

The political conservatism among Malay youth is increasingly influenced by platforms like TikTok. The rise of TikTok as a dominant source of information has led to a unique form of engagement with political content, one characterized by both critical observation and an underestimation of personal influence. PAS has become synonymous with TikTok within Malaysia's political scene with other parties playing catch-up but with little success (Sipalan and Hadi 2023).

One participant's perspective was that, "Because they [peers] have a resentment, they keep watching videos on TikTok ... that thing influences them instead of them really involve themselves in the real thing",[14] highlights how political content on TikTok becomes a substitute for direct political engagement. Another participant even admitted, "I'm not really into political issues. Unless it's a very viral thing, like a sentiment or something like that."[15] This suggests that while youths may be engaging with political ideas, the platform's nature may encourage passive consumption rather than active involvement.

The observation that "The youths are easily manipulated by political parties and because they are so young, but this kid is aged like 18 … so it's a big concern to me"[16] emphasizes concerns about the susceptibility of young individuals to political manipulation through social media. This concern is echoed in the stance "I'm against it [lowering the voting

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[14] Ibid.

[15] Personal communication, 15 March 2024.

[16] Personal communication, 17 November 2023.

age] … because they are easily manipulated by some artists [on social media]."[17] Another participant shared, "Voting at 18, when she [sister] graduated from school, she didn't know anything about politics. And she voted because of the issues on TikTok ... She barely knew the candidates themselves."[18] This brings to light the influence of social media and how platforms like TikTok can serve as a primary source of political information for younger voters. It raises concerns about the depth of understanding and engagement with political content that is often simplified or sensationalized for social media consumption, potentially leading to voting decisions being based on limited or skewed information.

Such views suggest a perception that youths see how their peers, while legally adults, are not really equipped to navigate the complex landscape of political influence, particularly when such influence is mediated by popular figures on social media. There have been allegations surrounding TikTok influencers being paid by PN as part of a strategy to garner votes (Dorall 2022; Mohd Husni 2022), particularly from the youth demographic. This social media strategy raises questions about the transparency and ethical considerations of using social media influencers in political campaigns. For youths who are highly active on platforms like TikTok, this signals the need for critical media literacy in order to discern between genuine content and politically motivated messaging.

One participant made the interesting observation that online presence could be considered as the young's immediate environment and thus we can expect political socialization to occur more online:

> Within the realm of technology, for example, may be gaming or chatting group … generally [they] like to follow some influencer and that influencer has a bubble of political narration that they believe in. So, they actually think of themselves as part of the group … they want to be in this environment.[19]

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[17] Ibid.

[18] Personal communication, 4 April 2024.

[19] Ibid.

The statement amplifies how technology and online communities can foster a sense of belonging through shared political beliefs. In other words, it is the extension of family and friends. Unfortunately, influencers within these spaces can create echo chambers, where a narrow perspective is repeatedly amplified, making it challenging for individuals to encounter or consider alternate viewpoints. This can lead to a collective identity that is closely tied to political conservatism.

Despite acknowledging the potent influence of TikTok on their peers, an interesting observation also emerged: many young individuals do not see themselves as being susceptible to such influences. The FGD participants recognized PN's social media strategy and for that reason, they kept on referring to themselves to be among those who actively research Malaysian politics relative to their peers. This dichotomy is captured in statements like "They are stupid. Maybe because of the vibe"[20] and "Because people don't read anymore. So, we acknowledge that's the way they get information. If there's no TikTok, they won't get anything",[21] which reflects a critique of their peers' reliance on TikTok for political information while implicitly suggesting a belief in one's own immunity to such influences. This is a clear indication of growing polarization in Malaysia whereby those who have different political leanings are considered "wrong" and easily manipulated but not those who share politically conservative ideas. This situation creates a paradox where Malay youths critique the susceptibility of their friends to narratives on TikTok, yet often fail to recognize their own vulnerability to the same influences. It underscores a broader trend where social media platforms, through their distinctive mechanisms of content delivery and engagement, shape not only the political perspectives of young individuals but also their perceptions of influence and autonomy in the political sphere. The result is a politically conservative landscape among

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[20] Personal communication, 17 November 2023.

[21] Personal communication, 22 December 2023.

Malay youths, shaped significantly by the content and dynamics of social media released by savvy political parties such as PAS, and complicated by a nuanced understanding of influence and self-awareness.

THE NEUTRAL ROLE OF ISLAMIC UNIVERSITIES

The influence of Islamic universities on the political behaviour of Malays is a nuanced topic that intersects issues of education, socialization, and personal belief systems. While it might seem that attending an Islamic university could significantly sway or shape students' political inclinations, several key points suggest that the impact of these institutions is limited in this regard. This limitation primarily stems from the predominant role of home and social media in socialization and the early formation of political beliefs and behaviours.

Firstly, the desire of students to enrol in Islamic universities often stems from a longing to be immersed in an environment that aligns with their faith, as one student expressed, "I just want to be in the environment, honestly."[22] This sentiment suggests that the decision to attend such institutions is less about political or religious indoctrination than it is about seeking an educational experience that resonates with their personal and religious ideals. A respondent even contrasts with their early experience at a so-called non-Islamic college and expressed happiness and contentment to be among practising Muslims at one of the universities.

Moreover, the approach to teaching in Islamic universities is described as being more informative and open-ended rather than prescriptive. A few students highlighted this point in contradistinction to their secondary school experience at Islamic schools in which religion was dictated to students rather than to be pondered upon. A student highlighted this by stating, "It's more like they [university lecturers] provide us the

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[22] Personal communication, 17 November 2023.

information for us to know why we need to learn something instead of, you have to do it."[23] This educational philosophy encourages students to think independently and form their own opinions, which extends to their political beliefs as well. The impact of Islamic-tinted academic teachings on voting behaviour appears to be minimal, which suggests that while students gain knowledge on political issues from an Islamic viewpoint, this does not directly dictate their political actions.

The diversity among faculty members in terms of their personal views and interpretations of Islam further dilutes the potential for a singular political ideology to dominate. This is despite Islamic universities having specific values and philosophies on the integration and Islamization of knowledge as described earlier. "The lecturer, I mean, not all lecturers follow [the institution]; I think, of course, all the lecturers, they have their own understanding, their own view,"[24] a student noted, illustrating that the exposure students receive is varied and not monolithic. This sentiment was shared by those in all three universities.

The curriculum at an Islamic university is designed with a thoughtful balance that caters to both academic rigour and faith-based learning. This educational approach encompasses a wide array of subjects, including politics and international relations, viewed through an Islamic lens, ensuring that students are not only well-versed in contemporary global issues but also understand these matters from an Islamic perspective. Such a curriculum enables students to bridge the gap between modern complexities and their faith, fostering a well-rounded understanding of the world. However, as shared by the research participants, this balanced educational journey is sometimes marred by challenges beyond the classroom. Some students face judgment and prejudice from peers and lecturers who may exhibit overzealous behaviour. These interactions, unfortunately, detract from the inclusive and understanding environment that Islamic universities strive to promote, leading to the limited influence of these universities on students' political socialization.

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[23] Personal communication, 15 December 2023.

[24] Ibid.

In terms of electoral behaviour, even though students are taught politics from an Islamic perspective—as noted, "So, as a student, whatever the standard is, in the end we will learn from the Islamic perspective. So, we know how politics should be done in the Islamic way"[25]—this education does not directly translate into how students vote. Rather, it informs their evaluation of political parties and leaders based on Islamic values: "I don't think it affects how I vote, but like learning the values and things here, it affects how I view the parties. It makes me reflect that, okay, this is acceptable."[26] Even the students who claimed they would never vote for a non-Muslim leader admitted that it has little to do with their education at an Islamic university but more with preconceived ideas learnt earlier in life. The pre-existing intentions and beliefs that students bring to the university play a significant role. "Before they enter the university, they already have their own intention",[27] indicating that students' political orientations and behaviours were heavily influenced by their prior socialization, which happened long before their university education—primarily at home and on social media. Due to this, we argue that early intervention in civic education is crucial as students tend to hold on to views established before enrolling into Islamic universities.

Therefore, while Islamic universities provide an environment where politics can be understood through an Islamic lens, the influence of these institutions on Malay students' political behaviour is limited. The foundational socialization that occurs at home and the pervasive influence of social media overshadow the impact of formal education in shaping political beliefs and behaviours. Furthermore, a university education might be too late to influence Malay youth's political behaviour at the ripe old age of 18 when they are allowed to vote.

While the establishment of Islamic universities, especially IIUM, has been cited as leading the Islamic revivalism movement in Malaysia,

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[25] Personal communication, 17 November 2023.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Personal communication, 15 December 2023.

this study finds that after four decades, there is diversity among faculty members that dilutes the narrow Islamization agenda to be more inclusive than assumed (Norshahril and Afra 2022). Furthermore, the universities are better regulated than *tahfiz* schools in Malaysia (Mohd Faizal and Afra 2023), providing a more balanced view of society and politics. This dynamic underscores the complexity of political socialization, where multiple factors contribute to the individuals' political dispositions.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we have discovered a profound revelation, namely the sense of Islamic identity and belonging often supersedes the allure of economic development for Malay youths when choosing how to cast their vote. Delving into the heart of their decision-making rationale, it becomes clear that idealism is at the forefront. Many express a desire to align their voting decisions with their personal faith, with one participant declaring, "I want to be an Islamic person."[28] This idealistic aspiration often leads to the sentiment that the presence of a Muslim leader is paramount and that any economic improvement that follows is merely a bonus rather than a primary motive for voting. When asked to choose between integrity and upholding Islam in governance, most of the participants chose to have a Muslim leader with a clear Islamist political agenda. Given the diverse backgrounds of the participants in the FGDs, from urban Kuala Lumpur to rural Kedah and Sarawak, it can be inferred that the economic background of the youth has a lesser impact on their political behaviour compared to their perceptions. Notwithstanding, although the participants expressed dissatisfaction with the state of the economy, their religious affiliation remained distinct from their economic context in contrast to the other characteristics identified, namely family and social media. Due to the participants' conservative bent, the present Unity government is perceived as "liberal", which is sometimes associated with a negative connotation of insufficient Islamic principles in the Malaysian context.

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[28] Personal communication, 22 December 2023.

It is worth highlighting an undercurrent within the voting tendencies—the proclivity to vote for Islamist parties is intricately tied to voters' identity. This choice is less about the alignment with the actual Islamic values espoused by the parties and more about an inherent sense of belonging to the Islamic community. When asked about a truly Islamic political party in Malaysia, all participants of our FGDs agreed that no party was perfectly Islamic. However, as long as a party—specifically PAS—continued to champion Islam, it was enough to win their votes. This identity factor had proven to be a dominant influence on their political orientation.

Looking at the primary influences in political socialization, we recognize that the family unit plays an essential role. It is within the family that youths first encounter and develop their political beliefs and values. The strong social structure provided by families offers the initial context in which political ideas and loyalties are formed. To understand conservatism among Malay youths in Malaysia, one needs to understand conservatism among their parents who lived through the Islamization period in Malaysia from the 1980s onwards. We hypothesized that Anwar Ibrahim, who played a prominent role in spearheading the Islamization initiative in Malaysia, would be seen to be erring in comparison to the stance of UMNO-BN, which is rooted in orthodox traditionalist principles, following his removal from the administration. Furthermore, the parents of the youths have opted for PAS over Anwar Ibrahim and his Madani agenda, due to the emergence of conservative Salafism as discussed earlier.

From the insights gathered, there emerges a stark need for the early introduction of civic education. Educating young individuals about the political process, the importance of voting, and the impact of their choices on the community can cultivate well-informed and responsible future voters before they reach adulthood and enter university. Ensuring that the younger generations appreciate their civic duties is crucial for the sustained health of Malaysia's democratic systems. In fact, the Sultan of Perak, Sultan Nazrin, asserted that it was imperative to engage in the study of the Humanities while equipping students with the necessary skills to tackle contemporary difficulties (*The Sun*, 8 February 2023). This study, therefore, suggests a more robust incorporation of

civic education into the fabric of youth upbringing in order to foster enlightened political participation from a young age. The government, via the Ministry of Education, has the infrastructure, resources and mandate to reach a wide audience, including embedding civic education into the public school system. However, government-run programmes may be perceived as biased or propagandistic, especially in politically polarized environments. Oversight committees or advisory boards comprising a spectrum of societal representatives could further enhance credibility and effectiveness, thus allowing students to be exposed to different ideas. This would develop critical thinking in Malay youths, whatever their political leaning may be.

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