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CONTEXTUALIZING THE MALAYSIAN CITIZENSHIP

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Abstract: *This paper focuses on explicating the unique characteristics of Malaysian politics and citizenship. This is achieved through a short historical background and a general overview of the different issues that build and contest the citizenship experience. Various theoretical positions and debates on the Malaysian citizenship is considered. Also scrutinized is the emergence of New Politics in Malaysia, where political participation shifts from its strict institutional and electoral origins to a more inclusive and contextualized understanding citizen participation. This development in citizenship theory speaks to the ways Malaysians are experiencing a gradual political transformation through the re-invigoration of civil society.*

Keywords: *Malaysia, Citizenship, New Politics, Participation, Civil Society, New Media, Mahathirism, Islamization*

Introduction

State control over political discourses and the strict restrictions imposed on socio-political groups and organizations inform Malaysians that politics is elitist and dangerous (Loh, 2003). In order to maintain political stability between the multi-racial citizenry, the state often adopts strict laws to assert the fear of instability to discourage Malaysians from being too politically vocal. Discussion in the public domain on sensitive topics such as race, religion and Malay rights is legally sanctioned. Laws such as the Official Secrets Act limit democratic discourse by allowing the state to curb any forms of political dissidence. The University and Colleges Act disallows Malaysian students from participating in any form of political movement. The Police Act states that any gathering of more than 5 people in a public area must have a permit from the police and that in any situation the police have the right to stop public gatherings (Case, 2015).

These laws and restrictions have not only allowed the state to penalize open political opposition, but have also taught Malaysians that political participation can be dangerous and that it is exclusive only to a selected few who are partisan and part of the political elites. Thus, the characteristics of a good citizen as proposed by the state are narrowed into accepting the establishment, abiding by the laws and voting in the state-organized election (Allen, 2008). Hence, politics and participation are defined strictly according to the state's definition that

emphasizes elitist, partisan, institutional and electoral traditions.

Problem Statement

The rise of new media and the ongoing transformation of the Malaysian society are slowly affecting this imposed understanding of politics and participation (Weiss, 2009). The availability of new media technologies has exposed Malaysians to information that can eclipse the state propaganda promoted by the mainstream mass media (Sani, 2009). Alternative information is no longer limited to the information coming from the opposition parties and non-government institutions; rather, the information comes from unaccounted sources that range from international news portals, political pundits and even everyday citizens (Weiss, 2008). As such, Malaysians are now well-informed about local and global politics, and exposed to many forms of democratic participation that may not conform to the ones promoted by the state.

At the same time, as Malaysians become more educated and affluent, they have now found the confidence to break away from the traditional fear of politics that has previously pushed many Malaysians away from participating in politics. According to Loh (2003) and Sani (2009), the new middle class that is educated and skilled has grown cynical about the country's illusion of harmony and equality and is unafraid to support the opposition. Members of the middle class no longer feel intimidated by the specter of religious and ethnic instability that has been threatened to arise if the ruling Barisan Nasional Government should lose its right to govern.

Moreover, Lim (2009) argued that Malaysia's young voters between the ages of twenty- one to forty appeared to be impatient with what they perceived as the ruling government's resistance to change. Young voters are aware of what is happening around them and have varied reasons to oppose the government. Young educated Malaysians are now looking beyond racial politics and are concerned with global issues such as good governance, the environment and human rights. This younger generation is also more concerned about their democratic rights to participate and be heard. They are more creative in defining politics and participation. They no longer see partisan politics as the only form of political participation.

Objective of the Study

Therefore, it is vital to capture these ongoing transformations in the citizenship experience by redefining politics and participation in Malaysia. The traditional definition of politics and participation that is confined to institutions and elections can no longer explain the citizens' own understanding and interpretations of their own political processes. New forms of media engagement and new found self-dependence have given many Malaysians the confidence to reclaim their position in democratic participation. More than that, they are also shaping their own politics, gravitating towards issues that interest and affect them personally and participating in ways that fit their own life goals and values (Loh, 2003).

As such it is this study's main objective to provide a historical and contextual look into politics and participation in Malaysia by extensively discussing, scrutinizing and problematizing the notion of politics and the political in a more inclusive manner so that the understanding of citizenship can go beyond the traditional, structural and electoral to appreciate experiential based politics that is now more evident in the everyday life of Malaysians.

Methodology

A qualitative method is the best approach to explain a conceptual study. Creswell and Poth (2017) argued that a qualitative research is significant in extracting ideas, concepts and theorizations from different texts and turning them into a unified research framework. While qualitative research is often criticized for it's reliability, it is on the other hand praised for its validity. Since the objective of this study is to propose a new conceptual and theoretical framework, qualitative methods that include literary and textual analysis were applied. Months of going through different literatures and historical accounts provided a mountain of data that was analyzed through careful thematic analysis. Thematic involves recording or identifying passages of text or images that are linked by a common theme or idea. These themese were than translated into a careful delineation of several conceptual proposals and arguments.

Theorising Malaysian Citizenship

There are two ways to theorise modern Malaysian politics and citizenship. One way is to look at the Malaysian experience through the strict theorisation of the Western, liberal democratic model, and the second way is to contextualise the deeply entrenched politics and culture that characterizes Malaysian politics.

The two theorisations reflect two different perspectives: the former comes from the analytical observation of the Malaysian political system based on universal democratic values such as free speech and individual human rights (Diamond, 2008), while the latter is mainly derived from the political sentiments established by the ruling government (Mahathir, 2010; Slater, 2003). Although the theorisations offer different understandings of Malaysian politics, both have strong arguments to define their interpretation of the Malaysian experience, with the difference between the two approaches based in the contrast between political universalism and particularism. From the perspective of the democratic political model, Malaysia is essentially a semi-democratic authoritarian society where democratic freedom is often secondary to state control. On the other hand, from the perspective of the Malaysian political establishment, the Western, liberal democratic approach cannot measure the unique experience of Malaysian politics and, hence the local elite offers an alternative version based on the notion of Asian values.

Semi-Democratic Authoritarianism

Case (2002) considers Malaysia to be the best example of a semi-democracy in South- East Asia. Semi-democracies "are usually presented as a subset of democracy, deviating in some measure from the category's spirit but distinguishable from the 'pseudodemocracies' and vacuous 'electoralism' that shade into authoritarianism" (Case, 1996, p. 438). They are also "presented as 'half-way houses', straddling uncomfortably the democratic and authoritarian categories that tug them in contrary directions". While semi-democracies "regularly hold elections, thus offering a snapshot of propriety on voting day, they have limited civil liberties beforehand" (Case, 2002, p. 6). In Malaysia, the opposition is hindered and cannot effectively compete, especially in terms of reaching out to the wider electorate as most media outlets are owned by the government and are "restricted in circulating their own party publications" (Case, 2002, p. 7).

Diamond (2008) describes Malaysia as one of the "most successful and self-confident pseudo-democracies". He notes that Malaysia occupies an ambiguous or disputed space between democracy and overt authoritarianism. Such countries have multi-party electoral systems, with significant opposition. These countries also have some space for civil society and intellectual dissent but individual and associational freedoms are often under mounting pressure, elections riddled with fraud, or arenas of political opposition and competition constrained by the dominating power of the state. These problems meant that it is difficult to call the system democratic, even in the minimal sense (Diamond, 2008).

Such limited democratic affordances can be exemplified by the way the government in Malaysia controls the electoral process. Although there is an independent election commission, called the "Suruhanjaya Pilihanraya", it has become widely accepted that the commission works in parallel with the ruling elite (Lim, 2005). The commission was established in 1957 under Article 114 of the Federal Constitution. The intended objective was to allow for the transparent administration and conduct of the electoral process so that it was fair to all competing political parties. However, this does not mean that the credibility of the electoral system is entirely dependent on the performance of the Election Commission, for the electoral process can be controlled and manipulated by the legislature and certain government practices. Legislative interference is not the only factor behind the government's control of the electoral process. The ruling government has at its disposal a whole array of state resources, including the command of administrative apparatuses, control over economic resources, and the ownership and regulation of the mass media (Putuchery & Othman, 2005).

Mahathir's Model of Asian Values

While comparison with the democratic model of citizenship offers a bleak view of the Malaysian experience, the Malaysian Government and several proponents of political particularism (Mahathir, 2010) argue that Malaysian politics – as well as the political experiences of many other countries whose historical and cultural contexts are different from those of the Western democracies – must be analysed from a perspective that takes into consideration cultural and historical particularities. Hence, scholars of Malaysian politics and Malaysian political leaders (Hwang, 2004) often conceptualise Malaysian politics and citizenship through an Asian perspective.

The role of Mahathir Mohamad, Prime Minister of Malaysia from 1981 until 2003, in defining Malaysian politics and citizenship is significant. Mahathir's strong internalisation of the Asian values approach was evidenced by his strict, or authoritarian, rule (Slater, 2003). Although Mahathir identified Asian values as the driving factor behind Malaysia's economic success, his critics also highlighted Mahathir's free use of the Asian values rhetoric to justify his controversial and authoritarian approach to governance (Hwang, 2004). As a strong advocate of Asian values, Mahathir offered a Malaysian perspective of Asian values that is based on Malay-Islamic culture, which he argued should be protected against the influence of Western values. In his book, *The Malay Dilemma* which was originally written in 1970, Mahathir promoted three fundamental components of "Malayness"; namely, feudalism, Islam, and *adat* (traditional customs) as features that must be adapted to modern needs (Mahathir, 2010). Mahathir rejected the Western liberal notion of human rights that he claimed poisoned Malaysian culture and religious beliefs. Concerned about the influence of Western individualism, and the future of Asian values and traditions, Mahathir accepted the idea of cultural relativism and launched the "Look East" policy in 1982 as a broader campaign against

Western values. The Look East policy reflected Mahathir's admiration of Japan's economic success. He aspired for Malaysia to follow the Japanese example by creating a sustainable economy. Amongst the outcomes of the policy was Malaysia's venture into heavy industries that led to the creation of Malaysia's own national cars, the Proton in the 1980s and Perodua in the 1990s.

Mendes (1994, p. 3) labelled the Malaysian version of the Asian values as "the Mahathir Model". The Mahathir Model helped to support the government agenda. Stability and enforced social cohesion in a heterogeneous society became internalised as a fundamental core of Asian values and was important in building the Malaysian society (Mendes, 1994). During his 22-year tenure, Mahathir transformed Malaysia from a country whose economy rested largely on the export of raw materials into a modern rapidly-developing nation of highways and skyscrapers with a diversified economy. The main elements of the Mahathir Model were strong authority, prioritising the community over the individual, and a strong family-based society. However, the idea that individual rights can be subordinated to those of the community and the state has great consequences for civil society in Malaysia. It has become a mantra in Malaysian politics that, in order to ensure the prosperity of the community, a strong state is required. While civil society is important as the space within which people can organise as a balance against the power of the state, they are ultimately considered to be subordinated to the state.

Due to fear of ethnic instabilities in society, along with appreciating the economic benefits that state-led development has secured, many in Malaysia support the building of a strong state (Loh, 2002). They have come to believe the rhetoric of the government that a strong state ensures economic growth and social harmony. However, in accepting the idea of Asian values, Malaysians have been persuaded or coerced to also accept Mahathir's version of governance that essentially re-affirmed, further strengthened and, at certain points, manipulated the colonial legacies of strong state control, racial-based policies and strict legislation.

Contestations in Malaysian Citizenship

While Asian values have had a developmental impact on Malaysia, the ways in which it has been conceptualised and implemented by the government, especially during the Mahathir period, reveal a major confrontation between the state's enforcement of cultural and social cohesion with citizen demands for human rights and democratic participation. The colonial legacy is defined by three contesting characteristics namely- strong state control, racial/religious segregation, and strict legislation on political participation – the ruling elites often use these legacies to protect their political power by masking them as Asian values or as the unique traits of the Malaysian society.

Malay Special Privileges

Due to its colonial legacy, politics and citizenship in Malaysia is very much defined along ethnic lines. This condition dates back to the early years of independent Malaya. According to Weiss (2004, p. 143), "Then, non-Malays fought to achieve citizenship within a Malayan political community without precluding their loyalty to the particular ethnic community to which they belonged, whereas Malay nationalists defined the Malay nation and state as synonymous, leaving little space for non-Malays' citizenship" In the attempt to acquire Malayan citizenship, the Malayan Chinese Association agreed to form a coalition with the Malay nationalist political party, the United Malay National Organization (UMNO), and eventually reached a compromise

with the UMNO to acquire non-Malay Malaysian citizenship that ultimately offered imbalanced citizenship rights to the non-Malays.

The dominant political party in Malaysia is the United Malay National Organization (UMNO), which is a Malay-based party. The second largest party is the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), which represents the interests of the Chinese community; this is followed by the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), which represents the Indian community. These three parties were the founding members of the Alliance Party in 1957. In 1973, the Alliance Party became the Barisan Nasional (BN) (National Front) when it took in other smaller parties, most of which were ethnic-based parties (Frisk, 2009). The Barisan Nasional has been the ruling government in the country since independence in 1957, essentially creating a one-party system in Malaysia. There are three main opposition parties: the religious party, the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), the Chinese-based Democratic Action Party (DAP), and the *Parti Keadilan Rakyat* (PKR) (People's Justice Party). The PKR was formed during the reform movement in 1998/99 when then Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim was sacked and jailed on corruption and sodomy charges that were believed to be trumped up (Anuar, 2003).

Ethnic politics are justified as part of the effort in creating an equal Malaysia in terms of eliminating economic disparities and upholding racial integration. However, efforts such as the National Economic Plan (NEP) are often openly biased towards the Malays and this in turn has produced a political culture that is not only divided but mostly discriminatory (Cheah, 2002). The NEP was launched by the Malaysian Government in 1971 to eliminate economic differences amongst the ethnic groups by proposing an ambitious and controversial socio-economic restructuring plan that focused on assisting the Malays to acquire at least 30% of the country's economy. This racially-biased affirmative action saw the creation of many economic programs and privileges such as scholarships, business funds and special loan rates offered only to the Bumiputeras (Foley, 2001)

The Islamisation of Malaysian Life

The designation of Islam as the official religion has also divided Malaysian citizens. Since Independence in 1957, Malaysia has seen an increased process of Islamisation promoted by the state. Barr and Govindasamy (2010, p. 293) argued that Islamisation in Malaysia "is basically a variation of the original Malay ethnonationalism, using the nearly complete symbiosis between Malay and Muslim identity as the point of articulation that allows religious nationalism to serve as a cipher for ethnonationalism". This means that the state's Islamisation project is also an ethnicised structural policy that continues to uphold the Malays' special position through a Malay-Muslim nationalist discourse. If Malay nationalism was the catalyst in the fight against the colonialists in the pursuit for Independence, the state's Islamisation project perpetuates a Malay-Muslim identity to create and maintain the Malays' support for the ruling government. According to Martinez (2001), the Islamic resurgence was never directed at converting non- Muslims to Islam. Rather, it was a political strategy targeted at Malays to adopt a stricter Islamic identity that can bring Islam under the government's control and scrutiny.

Although Islam has been recognised as the official religion since 1957; analysts (Weiss, 2004; Mohamad, 2010) claim that it was in the 1970s; during the wake of the Global Islamic Resurgence; that the Islamisation project found its footing in Malaysian politics. The ongoing Islamic discourse that was prevalent in the Muslim world revitalised debate about the fundamental questions of what being Muslim is about. Initially, the Islamisation movement was

led by Malay university students exposed to the transnational resurgence of Islamic thought, but over time the movement penetrated into major national institutions and took root (Weiss, 2004). This rise of the new Islamic-educated Malays, who were mostly trained in the Middle East asserted intense pressure on the UMNO to prove that it was Islamic. The rise of the Islamic consciousness also entrenched the rivalry between the two main Malay-Muslim political parties, namely, the historically secular-nationalist UMNO, and the more Islamist PAS in the contest to become the Muslim champion. In the wake of the Malay community's religious scrutiny, the UMNO needed to prove that it was more "Islamic" than the PAS. This led Weiss (2004) to argue that the UMNO Islamisation project was less a religious conviction than an invested electoral strategy.

The government pushed its Islamisation project by introducing Islamic reforms into the financial sector, establishing Islamic insurance schemes and usury-free banking, strengthening Islamic education policies, stressing the observance of Islamic rituals in official government settings, sponsoring centres for research and teaching on Islam, and enhancing Islam-related programming in the state-controlled media. Weiss (2004) and Mohamad (2010) argued that it was the UMNO-led government's Islamisation policy that began in the 1980s which helped to normalise political religion in everyday life.

The implementation of the *Shariah* law proved to be most controversial to two main demographics, the non-Muslims and the Muslim women. For the non-Muslims, the increased implementation of Islamisation in the political, social and cultural fabric of Malaysian life has gradually affected their livelihood. The Islamisation of education, for example, has seen more Islamic components incorporated into the Malaysian public education system, forcing Muslims and non-Muslims alike to adhere to Islamic knowledge and values (Barr & Govindasamy, 2010). The implementation of *Shariah* law, especially in divorce and religious conversion cases, has also affected and, to a certain extent, angered the non-Muslim communities. In divorce and child custody cases that involve Muslim and non-Muslim couples, the *Shariah* court has the prerogative over the civil courts and this has led to claims of a legal bias against the non- Muslims (Shah & Sani, 2010).

While the Islamisation project was initially the state's political strategy in combating the Islamisation movement, it has resulted in a complex entrenchment of ethnicity, religion, politics and citizen rights that have ultimately strengthened the status quo while excluding certain demographics from achieving their full potential as citizens.

Strict Legislations

While issues of race and religion continue to define Malaysian citizenship, strict laws are imposed to limit individual rights, critical debates, and autonomous power centres inside and outside the state. These strict laws limit citizens' participation and have created a sentiment of fear about politics among Malaysians (Loh, 2002). These laws, such as the Internal Security Act (ISA) and Sedition Act, are mostly inherited British laws originally used to subdue the communist movement from 1948 onwards, and have been used to detain a range of people, including members of opposition parties, social activists, and members of religious groups. More contemporary laws such as the Official Secrets Act (OSA) and the University and Colleges Act have also been used to curb possible political uprisings.

The legal restrictions on political participation, obviously meant to curb dissent and protect the established status quo, have created a culture of political apathy and fear of political participation (Anuar, 2003). The ethnic-based political framework that privileges the Malays has prevented the non-Malays from acquiring a sense of belonging and accountability as equal Malaysians. The Malays are constantly reminded that being privileged means they are indebted to the state, or more specifically the UMNO, and therefore they should not challenge the political patronage that provides and protects their privileged position (Sani, 2009). Meanwhile, the state's Islamisation project has pushed non-Malays and women in general into a conservative moral and religious discourse that has affected their basic rights to equal participation. Despite such political restrictions, the Malaysian citizenry has historically accommodated the state's strong control over their political and even private lives.

The Emergence of New Politics

Despite the limited freedom granted for citizens' political participation, ongoing changes have affected the ways citizenship and politics have been understood and practised in Malaysia. In 2003, Loh and Saravanamuttu argued that Malaysia was experiencing a New Politics. According to Loh and Saravanamuttu (2003), New Politics within the Malaysian context referred to the development of a new participatory democracy that was challenging the ethnic and elitist interpretation of Malaysian politics. Loh (2003) specifically categorised Malaysian politics into two realms. The first is the formal electoral and procedural realm of democracy involving the bureaucracy, the executive, the judiciary, the parliament, the electoral process and political parties. Political participation in this formal realm is institutionalised and circumscribed by the Federal Constitution, Acts of Parliaments and other laws. The second realm is the informal realm of participatory democracy that is characterised by the struggles of ordinary citizens, communities, NGOs and other informal groups to create a public sphere that allows for alternative views of development and public participation to be expressed and pursued. Loh argued that it is within this informal political realm that Malaysia was moving towards a new politics of pluralism that challenged the established and institutionalised ethnic politics.

Loh (2003) attributed the development of this new informal participatory politics to the rise of civil groups that were focused on identifying and supporting citizen actions that were mostly related to everyday social actions and not necessarily or directly related to electoral politics. Shamsul (1999) similarly suggested that Malaysia was seeing the development of a new form of politics, one "based on a variety of interest-orientations, beyond class and ethnicity" (p. 7). The new politics was not interested in gaining votes but in creating a space to express discontent with the status quo (Shamsul, 1999, p. 9). More recently, Sani (2009) posited that Malaysia was seeing more democratic changes that were gradually changing the old politics of autocratic democracy practised by the ruling Barisan Nasional that had so far permitted elite deliberation only. To stay in power, the BN-dominated government had restricted the people's rights to political freedom and controlled dissent and criticism. Several scholars (Sani, 2009have argued that the twelfth general election, held in March 2008, was a significant indicator that Malaysia was moving towards New Politics. The losses sustained by the Barisan Nasional in that election showed that Malaysians were no longer fixated on the idea that only the Barisan Nasional with its strong adherence to Asian values and ethnic politics could provide the best form of government for Malaysia.

Re-invigoration of Civil Society

Civil society in Malaysia is an important avenue for social and political participation as well as for influencing policy formation and public opinion. Foley (2001) argued, because of the state's preoccupation with staying in power by focusing on narrow political concerns such as economic development and monitoring media practices, many social issues have been left unaddressed. This neglect has provided a solid foundation for NGOs to build their activism and support base. For the Malays, problems such as drug addiction among Malay youth or Muslim women's fight against the *Shariah* courts were not on the state's agenda. Women's issues such as sexual discrimination and the 'glass ceiling' at the workplace began to attract the attention of women's groups such as Sisters in Islam and Tenaganita. For the non-Malays, dissatisfaction with biased policies led many to abandon the state politics that they felt were not benefiting them, preferring instead to participate in social activism that was more relevant to their community. These gaps provided space for NGOs to mobilise to help these people and others left behind by the one dimensional development plan of the state. This NGO movement and the concern of intellectuals and other individuals with issues of rights and social justice also contributed to the creation of a new form of politics within Malaysia (Loh, 2003).

Sani (2009) explained that since the 2008 general election, Malaysia's civil society movement had become stronger due to a change in the hearts and minds of the two major components of the society, namely, the youth and the middle class. First, Malaysia's young voters between the ages of twenty-one to forty appeared to have become impatient with what they perceived as the BN's reluctance and resistance to change. Young voters were aware of what was happening around them and had varied reasons to vote for the opposition. The BN's disconnectedness from young people was most alarming in the case of urban professionals, who no longer believed that the ruling coalition was capable of making a better Malaysia. They were educated and skilled, and thus were unafraid to take a chance on the opposition.

These developments have further enhanced the viability of New Politics in Malaysia and have resulted in the creation of a new generation of Malaysians who question the strict interpretation of electoral and ethnic politics that they now see as distant and even irrelevant to their everyday lives.

Influence of Social Media

In addition, Social Media have enabled Malaysians who were previously excluded from the political discourse to participate in public deliberation of issues and politics. They are now able to create and moderate their own media without having to face limitations and intimidations imposed by the state. As such, Malaysians have found it easier to acquire alternative information and at the same time contribute to the political marketplace.

The true impact of these new media is found in the reports and coverage on the Internet that was strong enough to influence people to vote for the opposition parties in the 2008 and 2013 general election. In fact, the ruling government admitted that one of the major factors in determining the 2008 general election results was the Internet. Then Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi acknowledged that the BN government had lost the online war in the general election. He said:

> We didn't think it was important. It was a serious misjudgment. We thought that the newspapers, the print media, the television were important but young people were looking at text messages and blogs. (The influence of the Internet) was painful. But it came at the right time, not too late. (in Steele, 2009, p. 91)

This experience indicated that the Malaysian citizenry was more sophisticated than the government had anticipated. The effects of development, globalisation, and information dissemination through the Internet had changed the political landscape. Malaysians clearly rejected the idea that the masses were generally simple-minded and easily influenced by the mentality of fear, particularly of racial tension, a mechanism often employed by the government to instil fear of political change in the citizenry.

Therefore, suffice to say that new political ideals and practices have emerged in Malaysia facilitated by the rise of civil society and the availability of new democratic media. While strict laws and political intimidation have limited political participation and citizenship experiences, the emergence of the New Politics indicates that the desire to be engaged and involved in socio-political issues and movements is very much alive among Malaysians. However, the rigid interpretation and enforcement of politics that are mostly confined to the formal electoral realm of democracy (Salman and Saad, 2015) have made it difficult to look at how citizenship is really understood and practised by Malaysians. These new forms of politics and participation that has emerged in Malaysia can be better understood, measured and analysed through new conceptualisations and theories of political participation and citizenship. The rise of new politics in Malaysia resembles Dahlgren's (2005) claim that:

> Many citizens have refocused their political attention outside the parliamentary system, or they are in the process of redefining just what constitutes the political, often within the context of social movements. Among such groups, the boundaries between politics, cultural values, identity processes, and local self-reliance measures become fluid (Beck, 1997). Politics becomes not only an instrumental activity for achieving specific goals, but also an expressive activity, a way of asserting, within the public sphere, group values, ideals, and belonging. (p.155)

The revitalisation of social activism, including media activism, the aim of which has been to offer citizens the democratic right to communicate, may reflect a shift in the ways in which people's interests manifest themselves, not only in politics, but also in a broader realm. Declining participation in traditional politics may suggest that rather than a downward spiral in all political participation, we are seeing a shift in the ways in which people are politically active (Bennett, 2008).

The Malaysian experience described above exemplifies Dahlgren's (2005) interpretation of renewed participation. For most Malaysians, the traditional elitist political culture no longer applies to them. This new generation defines politics and participation in ways that are more meaningful for them. For instance, they are more attracted to participating in civil society and are demanding more accountability from the government (Weiss, 2009; Loh, 2009). These citizens understand politics as more than the abstract participation in institutions, and elections, and are instead internalising politics as part of everyday life (Dahlgren, 2006), or something that they can meaningfully approach and apply in their day-to-day citizen experience.

Conclusion

The Malaysian state has adopted the Asian value framework that prioritizes collective interests over individual rights. However, the Malaysian interpretation of Asian values is often contested by the way the state tends to subordinate individual rights and civil society, leaving a very limited space for democratic participation. Thus this paper proposed that recent developments such as the reinvigoration of civil society and the affordances of new media have brought

changes to this rigid interpretation of citizen participation. Politics and participation is now more inclusive in the sense that they go beyond what is structural to what is more experiential.

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