

Being A Young Political Activist In Contemporary Malaysia: Motivations And Challenges

Norhafiza Mohd Hed¹

¹*Department of Social Studies & Citizenship, Faculty of Human Sciences, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI), 35900 Tanjung Malim, Perak, MALAYSIA*

¹*norhafiza@fsk.upsi.edu.my*

Abstract

There is a dearth of empirical studies on young political activist in Malaysia, specifically on how and why they get involved in political activism, and in relation to the rich literature that has developed in Western democracies. By applying Klandermans's framework of 'Demand and Supply of Participation' framework, together with the data collected primarily from interviews with youth political activists, this study examines the engagement of youth activists who were actively involved in political activities including social movements, protests and civil society in Malaysia. This includes their motivations to get involved and the challenges they faced as political activists. The findings showed that most of the activists interviewed started to actively participate in political activism at university, as student activists. Even though most of them have graduated, they still carry on their activism. To some extent, their motivations to political activism in Malaysia are significantly driven by a strong belief that their participation could bring about change, a sense of collective identity and strong attachment to specific groups and aided by the strong influence of social networking.

Keywords: *Youth activist, political activism, motivations, challenges, contemporary Malaysia*

1 Introduction:

Youth have long played an important role in shaping political landscape and bringing social changes to nations. There are strong evidences, for example, the pro-democracy movement in South Korean in 1987, the campaign to topple Suharto in Indonesia in 1998, and the Egyptian uprising in 2011, that young people, mainly the students were the driving force in each case pushing for democratic change (Lucan Way 2014). Conversely, there are times when youth activism led or contributed to the installation of authoritarian regimes like the 1971 coup in Thailand or the Iranian Revolution in 1979. In Malaysia, the involvement of young people in politics can be traced back to the pre-independence era, mainly when the Sultan Idris Training College (SITC) was established in 1922. The establishment of this institution had indirectly contributed to the emergence of the first political association known as the Kesatuan Kaum Muda (Young Malay Movement or KMM). KMM was seen as a Malay nationalist movement and having leftist politics rather than a mass political movement as it only represented the political crisis between the Malays and the British. Inspired intensely by the Indonesian nationalist movements, KMM aimed to enhance greater political awareness for Malay youth to overthrow colonial power through a political amalgamation of the Malays in Malaya and Indonesia, under the notion of 'Melayu Raya' (Greater Malay Nation-state). KMM envisaged upholding the Malay supremacy and reviving the legacy of the Malay kingdoms like Majapahit, Srivijaya and Malacca into a larger entity, known as the republic of Indonesia (Ramlah Adam, 2004:90). However, this movement was banned in 1942 by the British and many of the prominent leaders were imprisoned.

The period from 1967 to 1974 marked the climax of student activism, the 'heydays of protest' (Weiss, 2011) or 'the golden age of the student movement' in Malaysia (Abu Bakar, 1973). Various student bodies were established, including the University of Malaya Islamic Students Society (PMIUM) and Malay Language Society (PBMUM), and the most influential of these was University of Malaya Student

Union (UMSU) as all student bodies were linked to it, except for the Socialist Club. Their shared focus went beyond the issue of students, but covered issues in national politics, policy, and any problems of the community. There emerged many well-known student leaders such as Anwar Ibrahim, Syed Hamid Ali, Syed Naquib al-Attas and Hishamuddin Rais, who were at the forefront of the student demonstrations. The student movements acted as non-partisan pressure groups to criticise the government's policies (Karim and Hamid, 1984). To curb the growth of the student movement, the government enacted the Universities and University Colleges Act 1971 (UUCA), and later was amended in 1975, prior to the mass arrest of students in the 1974 Tasik Utara and Baling incidents. The 1975 amendment of the UUCA 1971 has silenced young people from being critical and vocal to being passive in activism.

However, during the 'reformation' era of the year 1998, it witnessed the remarkable emergence of young people engaging in Malaysian politics. The participation of young voters exploded in the nation and began with the dismissal of a former deputy prime minister, Anwar Ibrahim from the government—he organized the Reformasi movement which was strongly supported by young people especially from university students. In spite of the waning Reformasi movement, youth activism continued energetically to advocate democracy and human rights. For example, June 2001 saw a large-scale student protest—around 400 students gathered at the National Mosque—demonstrating against the ISA (Weiss, 2011). In the same year, many more young people were arrested for protesting against police brutality and restrictions on political activism. At the same time, the youth uprising also appeared in the political tsunami during the 2008 general election, and substantially during the Malaysia's 14th General Election in 2018, which resulted to the collapsed of the Barisan Nasional (BN) government. Many argue that young Malaysians now have shown increasing interest in politics, becoming actively engaged in the political arena, including in voting, and in fact some of them were elected as political representatives (Noorsulastryurni, 2014; Norshuhada et al., 2016). Yet, this is debatable, since there is no clear-cut evidence whether majority of young people are actively engaged in politics. In this paper, we argue that there is a large gap between politically active and inactive young people because only a fraction of young Malaysian is involved actively in politics, while the rest remains disengaged and tend to be 'apathetic'. Therefore, by integrating the findings from qualitative interviews with a group of young activists, this paper aims to shed light on why some young people are politically active and what drives their behaviours by analysing the motivations for engagement, how and why they got involved in politics, their interpretation of politics, as well as the challenges they faced in participating in political arena.

2 Conceptual Framework: Demand And Supply Of Participation:

Youth activists were influenced by diverse motivations and the motivation to participate depends on costs and benefits gained (Klandermans, 1997; Muller and Opp, 1986). Since political participation is the "study of everything" (Van Deth, 2001:4) and takes a variety of forms, it could be distinguished by the time and risk or effort of engaging in different kinds of action (Klandermans, 2004). Some require little time, but are potentially risky, like a protest, a sit-in or joining a strike. Other forms of participation such as giving money, signing petitions or attending peaceful demonstrations demand less time and less risk. At the same time, joining an organisation is both time consuming and takes substantial effort. Therefore, different forms of political activity require different kinds of resources (Verba et al, 1995), or what are termed 'motivational dynamics' (Klandermans, 2004:361). By developing the social-psychological dimension of movement participation, Klandermans (2007) borrowed the metaphors of 'demand and supply' from the economics. Demand means potential factors that drive people to protest such as political socialization, grievances, and formation of collective identity. On the other hand, supply refers to the opportunities that people have to protest like the effectiveness of social movement, action repertoires and social networking. In particular, mobilization which is the marketing mechanism of the social movement is an important process to link demand and supply (Klandermans, 2007).

Therefore, Klandermans suggests three fundamental motives (demand-supply why people participate in

the movement or collective political actions) which are: Instrumentality; identity; and ideology. Instrumentality denotes as an effort to influence the political decision or social environment, particularly to bring about political changes. When people are demanded for political change, it must begin with political dissatisfaction, inequality, feeling of injustice, feeling of relative deprivation and grievance (Klandermans, 1997). However, not all aggrieved people participate in politics, but the belief that the situation can be changed at the reasonable costs that make them participate. In other words, people participate by taking into consideration the costs and benefits of participation. Tilly (1978) who coined the term 'repression' argues that repression is one of the important elements in the political opportunity structure that can be understood as actions or process that increase the costs of collective actions. Repression could have a cumulative effect. Individuals are expected to participate in politics when the benefits are greater than the costs — the cost-benefit calculation (Riker and Ordeshook 1968; Clarke et al. 2004). Therefore, the increased costs may lead to dissident disintegration and constraint citizens to participate in collective actions. In a simplistic way, increased repression is likely to decrease participation in any form.

By contrast, identity refers to sense of belonging to or identification with a valued group. There are many different places in society such as student, housewife, politicians and so on which are sometime exclusive, engaged by small group of people and have roles or positions to play. This can be called as 'personal identity'. However, when the personal identity is shared with other people, this is known as 'collective identity'. Collective identity can take many forms such as loyalties, identification, sharing rituals, songs, meetings, signs, and common codes. In this regard, those who have strong identification with a group (collective identity), are more likely to participate in political action on behalf of that group (de Weerd and Klandermans, 1999). For example, the more civil servants identify with other civil servants, the more prepared they are to take part in civil servant's protest. On the other hand, ideology simply means an expression of one's views or in pursuit for meaning (Klandermans, 2007:361). The responsibility to disseminate the ideas and values lies in the hand of social movement through processes such as mobilization, framing and dialogue to the public. As the circle of youth activists is small, and many of these activists are the drivers for social movement and protests in Malaysia, it is important to understand the reasons why they participate in such movements. Following this, it seems reasonable to use the framework of 'Demand and Supply of Participation', proposed by Klandermans (2007) in this paper to examine what motivates young activists in Malaysia to actively engage in political activism.

3 Data And Methods:

The article employs qualitative approach by adopting in-depth interviews as an instrument. The qualitative interviews in this study are conducted face-to-face by using semi-structured interviews with 20 informants that have been selected purposively among young people who have actively participated in political activities such as social movement, political parties, NGOs, as well as members of loosely structured organisations. The sample was appropriate as this study investigated a narrow but deep subject and it built up detail, strong and convincing analytical explanations of particular contexts. In seeking access to a sample of political activists, their names and contact details were retrieved from official websites and social networking sites, they were contacted via email and through phone calls explaining the purpose of the interviews and why they had been selected. The consent form and participant sheet were attached together. Once they agreed to be interviewed, appointments were scheduled accordingly at dates, times and locations preferred by the respondents. Prior to the interviews, the respondents were contacted again to reconfirm the dates and locations of the interviews. In this regard, the interviewing process continued for a period of two months (from November 2019 to January 2020). The participants were given an option whether to speak in English or the Malay language, but generally most interviews were conducted in the Malay language. In line with ethical procedures, the participants had been provided with the consent form, which stated the purpose of this research including issues of confidentiality and protection; participant's consent and right to withdraw; and the rights of the researcher to interpret,

analyse as well as publish the data. Field notes and digital audio-recorders were used to record the conversation with the permission of each participant, and subsequently transcribe to ensure that there was no manipulation or distortion of the text. Normally, the interviews lasted for about 30 to 60 minutes, but tended to be longer because they had much more to say about their activism, motivation, and overall picture of politics in Malaysia. To preserve the authenticity of the text, the interviews were translated from Malay to English language by the researcher herself. The interviews were thus important to obtaining information on the respondents' demographic profile, their general opinions on politics and motivations to participate in order to achieve the aims of the research. The thematic analysis of this study was done by using a qualitative data analysis program: NVivo 10.

4 Findings And Analyses:

Who are they?

We started the interview by asking participants about their own background and how they first got interested and involved in politics. Generally, most of the youth activists who were interviewed were in their early twenties and thirties, with 26 or 27 being the common age. Most activists were highly educated—they have graduated from Malaysia's most respected local universities, and a few were still at the university. Most among them had read for degrees in the social sciences including politics, economics and law. Given their education background, it is perhaps not surprising that most possessed a basic knowledge of politics or at least were aware of the contemporary political landscape. As expected, the majority of youth activists described themselves as middle-class. Several respondents noted that their parents were working in the government and the private sector, where they earned just enough money to live comfortably. For example, Informant 1 said "I am from a middle-class family where you live within what you have." This finding conforms with the social movement literature (Barnes et al., 1979; Offe, 1985) that many new social movements and protest activism are formed by middle-class activists.

As political activists, the participants were more drawn to politics. When asked about their own political leanings, none of them said they stood for a strong ideological position, be it left or right on the spectrum whilst most of them were actively participating in protests and social movements. Rather, they placed themselves on the moderate level or centre-left politics, promoting the ideas of social justice or equality. This is reflected in the comments of Informant 2, "No one cares about political ideology in Malaysia, but for me, I would put myself along the line of progressive ideology." Out of the twenty youths interviewed, only three actively joined political parties, mainly the opposition, as members. Since these activists were active members of the opposition parties and they were somewhat more likely to place themselves as pro-opposition and anti-government. This needs to be borne in mind when analysing the results. Although the rest of the activists remained independent or participated actively in NGOs, they mentioned they made a conscious effort to establish a good network with some of Malaysia's influential parties. Activists in political parties agreed that the main reason why they chose this path was because they have more chance to make a change, although this is the most unpopular decision amongst the youth, as stated by Informant 3, "I think if we do not enter the political arena and don't try to make a change, who else will?" Informant 4 also responded positively by saying, "The political party needs the 'expert' and fresh ideas from young people. So, I saw there was a space for me to help them and to make some changes." However, those outside a party felt that changes can be achieved with or without the parties, as long as we participate in civil society. In this case, some activists (13 out of 20) argued that it is in the nature of political parties to be in a power struggle, so we need a 'third party' to monitor them, as commented by Informant 5, "I am not saying that political parties are not doing good work, but they should have a check and balance." Indeed, in the case of Malaysia, some NGOs are quite vocal and, to some extent, influential in their advocacy of democracy and human rights, but they do not have a strong mass support base (Saliha, 2002). Therefore, civil society needs more participation from people to effectively play its role as 'watchdog' of the government. In addition, party rules and regulations, as well as the attitude of politicians who

sometimes force people to do something against their will is another factor that makes some activists chose to engage with NGOs, as depicted by Informant 6, “It is really hard because there are many limitations inside the party and you have to work for the party and follow their directions.” This supports views from Informant 7 that the way parties’ function might be the main barrier for young people becoming members.

The classical approaches to political socialisation often sought to find out how early childhood development shaped the political attitudes and outlooks of the individual (Flanagan and Sherrod, 1998). Influences from the most important agents of political socialisation such as family, peers, educational institutions and the media in the earlier life of individuals are considered to have greater impact on their political activism in later years. Of the twenty youths interviewed, half came from a very political family who was actively involved in political activities. In particular, the family has been the most influential agent of political socialisation and transmitter of political values amongst activists from a very early age, conforming to the argument of Jennings et al. (2009). In addition, 5 out of 10 respondents also mentioned that their family support the opposition. This is reflected in the comments of Informant 3, “Since a young age, I often followed my mother who was an active member of PAS and always went to PAS talks and activities. So, I knew about current issues and what was happening around me.” Young people whose family frequently engaged in political actions and encouraged the expression of strong opinions, even those challenging the status quo, are more likely to be politically active citizens. Therefore, we can expect that most youth activists who came from a pro-opposition family, typically, have developed an anti-establishment attitude and tend to be critical of the government. In other words, young people’s political beliefs are greatly affected by the values and attitudes learnt from their families. Other activists (2 out of 10) argued that politics was a common topic of conversation, even if their families were not activists, as stated by Informant 12, “My family is not involved in any sort of political activities, but we always discuss current politics at home.” In this regard, being heard or valued at home contributes to a strong sense of political efficacy and the feeling that their ideas are worthy, which is really important to activism (Torres, 2006). Therefore, the findings support the arguments of Hyman (1959) and Sigel (1970) that family is always acknowledged as the primary agent of political socialisation.

In some cases, instead of family, youth activists themselves may act as socialising agents for their family, as stated by Informant 10, “At first, my family prevented me from being active in politics, but after I explained to them the reason why I did this, they can understand it. And now, they consistently follow updates on political development and give full support to me.” Those young people who partake in activist causes are more likely to be informed and thoughtful citizens as they closely follow political updates and experience issues faced by the community. Therefore, they may disseminate information not only to their family, but also to the public and encourage them to participate in politics. This clearly empowers the youth to be ‘information leaders’ (McDevitt and Butler, 2011). For the remaining participants, they believed that their political attitudes and ideas were shaped by educational institutions, mainly university. Educational institutions provide training grounds to stimulate young people’s political skills and learning through the formal classroom, extra-curricular activities, and student bodies. This is important for young people because the political education they received in university stimulates them to think critically about politics and social realities, as mentioned by Informant 15, “The university environment has opened our eyes to clearly see reality. That is why we feel that we need to participate to express our dissatisfaction with the university system and policies in this country.” Therefore, the phenomenon of growing political activism amongst young people in Malaysia has been associated with student activism as they are at the forefront of movements fighting for political rights and freedom.

Early involvement in political activism

There are a variety of ways individuals enter into political activism. Some began with small scale activities such as attending meetings, volunteering activities, and slowly become actively engaged as full-

time activists (Martin, 2007). Whereas, others become involved straight away in high-scale activities like organising protests. Since a social movement seeks to create ‘a world apart from the dominant culture’ (Taylor and Whittier, 1992:113), the process of becoming part of an activist community is problematic and difficult if there is no connection to social movement networks, identifiable organisations, or necessary contacts (Weinstein, 2005). As expected, most (17 out of 20) of these activists, when asked about their early political involvement and how they gained access to a group, said that their political activism began at university, as student activists, and that they gained access to the activist community through their active roles in student movements such as Student Solidarity of Malaysia (Solidariti Mahasiswa Malaysia or SMM), Malaysia Youth and Students Democratic Movement (DEMA) and the Federation of Islamic Student of Malaysia (Gabungan Mahasiswa Islam Se-Malaysia or GAMIS). These student organisations were responsible for organising political campus activities and taking strong stands against the government policies by staging pro-democracy protests. This can be seen in the response by Informant 18:

“In 2010, I joined a protest voluntarily, protested the rise of Water tariffs at the National Mosque, and over there, I knew many student activists from other universities. And then, my university acted against me, and they barred me from student bodies, student election and all sorts of things. I brought up this case at the national level student movement and from there I started to actively join student movement.”

As for Informant 16, her exposure and experienced grew when she studied abroad and contributed to her political awakening, as reflected in her comments, “When I did my masters in the UK, most of my awakening is from there, particularly when I did some work for the Socialist Worker Party...” Being abroad has initiated the complex process of reflection between what young people perceived to be Malaysian democracy and Western democracies because they had a chance to get closer participation with globally connected social movements. For the remaining participants (3 out of 20), their political activism began when they started working, whether being employed or self-employed. The workplace or working environment may open up the opportunity to acquire civic and political skills that are needed to become an active citizen, as pointed out by Informant 14, who was an entrepreneur “My initial involvement in politics began when I worked as a bookseller and I got mixed-up with many core student activists from the UKM.” This supports findings from Humphries (2001) that those independent business owners have a tendency to be the main actors in political affairs and more likely to be invited to participate actively in politics since they have a central position in social networks. However, for Informant 10, his decision to quit his job in corporate banking and build a career as an activist began when his friends were arrested by the government. According to Informant 10, “I was not involved in this kind of thing much, until in 2007, when two of my friends were detained under ISA. They didn’t have any political associations, but they were detained for some reasons which I think ridiculous and unacceptable.” In this sense, the discriminatory experiences of someone close to us may develop our political awareness and a sense of responsibility to the community to change an unfair situation.

Interpretations of politics

Youth activism in the past was often interrelated with idealism, altruism and rebellions (Luzatto, 1997). But how about youth activism today? Do young people have an idealistic or rather narrow interpretation of politics? Generally, most youth activists have a broad and clear understanding of politics. Out of twenty youths interviewed, 13 saw politics as a process of governance and administration of a country. This can be seen in the response of Informant 17, “I think if you want to put it in a simple way, politics is something that is designed by a system, governed by a government that has been elected by people...” In contrast, some claim (10 out of 20) that politics is a tool or mechanism to achieve something, as explained by Informant 5, “Politics is a tool that is used to gain something, your own agendas, whatever agenda that you have. For example, environmentalists use politics, student uses politics, chauvinists, fascists, racists, and all of them use politics.” Informant 3 also reacted positively by commenting that, “Politics is not just

between the political representatives and the people, but we have politics in the workplace, in university, in the office and so on. Politics is everywhere.”

These suggest that the definition of politics is relatively wide, is beyond political parties or politicians, and it encompasses all aspects of human life. Therefore, as proposed by Informant 14, the more you participate in politics, the more you are able to govern yourself since “Politics is relating very much on how politically involved you are and how politically empowered you are.” However, the activists argued that many young people misunderstood the definition of politics as they frequently associate politics with politicians and political party. According to Informant 12, “Sometimes when we heard the news about a leader who was arrested because of corruption, we straight away jumped to the conclusion that it is ‘politics’.” In this regard, politics is viewed as a ‘dirty game’ if it is only based on actors who habitually abuse power in the system. Perhaps, having a narrow understanding of politics—politics is equivalent to political actors, could create a tendency for people to have a sceptical view about politics and the whole political system. This in turn will make them feel less in favour of engaging in the political process.

What motivates them in political activism?

Based on the responses, there was a strong sense amongst half of these activists that they were motivated to actively engage in politics for political and social change. This is rooted in their recognition of deprivation, injustice, and indignation about some of the government’s policies, as commented by Informant 12, “What motivates me is that this country is moving in the wrong direction, and injustice is everywhere.” This opinion is also extended similarly by Informant 2 in his comment, “...we can see that our country is not moving in a better direction. We are moving towards a ‘failed state’ in terms of the economy, politics, and society. So, we can conclude that our country requires a total change. Not a small-scale reform.” It is clear that instrumentality is the motive to participate where the activists have a strong belief that their participation could bring about change, if not now, at least for future generations. This is reflected in the comment of Informant 7, “We are fighting to see Malaysia better than what it is now. This is not for us, but it is for the next generation.” Evidently, we can see in Malaysia, there were several cases where movements have clearly been successful in irreversibly changing policies. For example, a national campaign for the abolition of the Internal Security Act (ISA) has been spearheaded by a coalition of human rights NGOs, such as Aliran, Hakam and Suaram, under a banner called as ‘Anti-ISA Movement’ (Gerakan Mansuh ISA, GMI) since 2001. After a decade of resisting and protesting against indefinite detention without trial, only in 2012 did the government repeal the act and replace it with the Security Offences (Special Measures) Act and release the detainees of ISA. This showed that the activists are aware that participation may not be effective straight away in bringing about changes (Klandermans, 2007), but it takes a long process or a ‘cycle’, as stated by Informant 15, “We do not want to do something quickly, but fail to bring about a change. If you get tired, you can take a rest, and will be replaced by others. And when you are ready, you can come back to fight for change. All this is a cycle”.

In addition, some activists (13 out of 20) claimed the reason why they participated in political activism is because they were part of a group in society—collective identity is a factor that stimulates them to participate. In this regard, their strong attachment to specific groups like labour, women, and lower-class groups increases their likelihood to participate in political activism. For Informant 1, belonging to the group of young people means leaning more towards an anti-establishment view. It is the nature of young people to be passionate and energetic in challenging the status quo and to refuse to acquiesce to the dominant culture. This is reflected in his comments, “As for young people, they are indeed rebellious. People don’t understand them, but it is part of the culture. Every period you can see there are counterculture groups who oppose the system, everything that they see as wrong.” Apart from group identity, Informant 1 also was heavily inspired by stories from many successful movements in the 1970s that he read from books, and this indirectly triggered his awareness to go against the system. In a similar vein, Informant 15 also stated that, “At the age of 11-years-old, I started to read political newspapers such

as Watan, which was very critical at that time.” In contrast, Informant 2, who came from a working-class family, saw that her family’s condition and the surrounding environment motivated her to actively engage in the civil society. She pointed out, “I can do something for marginalised groups because I saw them in their economic background where they live in poverty, but it is beyond having an economic reason.” This confirms findings from the literature (de Weerd and Klandermans, 1999; Stryker et al, 2000) that the construction of collective identity is central to social movements—the more people identified themselves with a group, the more they inclined to engage in political movements.

Others (12 out of 20), believed the agent of mobilisation was social networking and people from successful movements who inspired them to actively engage in the movement’s cause. According to Informant 16, “...I was in the UK during the rise of popular uprising such as the Arab Spring and the anti-austerity movement of Spanish students where there were calls for greater democracy. At that time, in Spain, the activists came out with a manifesto titled ‘real democracy now’, and I was very inspired by the people who were attached to these movements.” This is one of the impacts of successful movements on individuals where they have been a source of inspiration for people to build political awareness and to champion a cause, so they have more inclination for further activism. Furthermore, there is an activist whose participation was strongly influenced by her emotions about the government and political system. An example of this point of view is given by Informant 5, “I’m mad with the government and I think if we do not show our anger, they cannot see and understand.” The sense of anger has been considered as the ideal emotion for protest (Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans, 2007), which in turn may stir up their motivation for collective actions. Indeed, the ‘feeling of anger’ has been used as a symbolic expression to attract others to participate, as mentioned by Informant 3, “We need the feelings of anger to attract other young people.” Therefore, they can create a so called ‘group-based anger’ and channel this feeling into a movement.

As political activists often hold different views from the government, they are the group that has always been targeted for crackdowns by the government. When being asked whether they had been caught by the authorities, the majority activists (18 out of 20) mentioned that they have been caught at least once during their participation, as reflected by Informant 9, “I was arrested seven times when I was a student activist, and two times when I worked for SUARAM.” Informant 18 also pointed out that, “I was arrested for involvement in the ‘Tangkap Najib’ rally.” Whilst they have been arrested many times, most of these activists said that they were not afraid, and the government’s crackdown could not stop them from continuing struggling for better change. They believed the experience of previous political figures was a source of inspiration to resist the current system. For them, their punishment is minimal compared to that of previous leaders and activists, as mentioned by Informant 20: “All the successful leaders out there have already been arrested a lot of times in their life. So, if I was in prison for five to six years, it is nothing compared to 27 years of Nelson Mandela in prison. That is why I challenged myself.” This opinion is also extended similarly by Informant 14 in her comment, “If we look at previous leaders, they were caught under the ISA, and even after they were released from ISA, they were still struggling. Meaning that, they have a very strong spirit.”

Despite being inspired by prominent political leaders, inner strength also came from the support and solidarity of family and friends, as depicted by Informant 2, “I was very touched, there was a time when me and my friend were in prison, and from inside the cell, we heard our friends calling our names outside the police station.” Indeed, positive social support from family and in-group members is the strongest support system for each activist to remain constant in their activism. This reaffirms the importance of identity construction (Melucci, 1995; Hunt and Benford, 2007) as a result of a strong sense of belonging or ‘we-ness’ within the activist community. Moreover, getting caught or imprisoned is the main risk undertaken by activists, so they must prepare themselves with basic information about legal and civil rights. According to Informant 15, “When we were first arrested, we were bullied and tortured by the police. But after several times, we did research about legal rights, specifically on the Penal Code, we

realised that the police were just doing their job and we were just practising our right as citizens.” Clearly, legal and political knowledge is important for activists to be better capable of judging when systems are poorly functioning and willing to act whenever necessary.

Youth activism and hopes for the future

Based on the interviews, some effective strategies are needed to encourage more young people to persistently participate in politics as suggested by these activists. First, 14 out of 20 activists believed that the political system is in need of a total overhaul in order to make young people get connected to the system. According to Informant 16: “I think we really need legal reforms because there are far more oppressive laws like the Sedition Act, the PAA, and the UUCA etc. All these laws very clearly abuse your fundamental human rights. These things should go.” However, legal reform alone is not sufficient to encourage young people to participate. Evidently, we can see that even the UUCA has been amended by the government to allow students to engage in political activism, but there are still fewer students participating. Therefore, it is important to reform the educational and social system, mainly the family institution, since both systems facilitate social change, as argued by Informant 20, “The disengagement of young people in politics occurred due to the weakness of the family institution. Parents pay less attention and they do not give a clear understanding of the current issues to their children.” It is normally perceived that young people’s political preferences are reflective of their family. So, the role played by the family may enhance positive attitudes about politics in young people.

Apart from family, political parties also need to closely engage with young people through their popular grassroots programmes, small-scales activities, and direct communication, as depicted by Informant 4, “Although face-to-face meetings with the grassroots is regarded as conservative, this conservative method is considerably effective for this time.” Indirectly, political parties can help to shed light on people’s political knowledge and current issues, even though it will threaten the survival of the party. Additionally, the activists (12 out of 20) also suggested that the political party must develop more potential young leaders to represent the ‘voice’ of young people, as mentioned by Informant 9, “We must put forward many young leaders, whether they are from the ruling party or the opposition, like Khairy Jamaluddin, Rafizi, Syed Saddiq, Datuk Saifuddin and so on.”

Furthermore, some (10 out of 20) activists recommended that young people need to be encouraged to create their own collective groups that actively help society through community programmes, as stated by Informant 3, “Many young people are not interested in politics, but they like to do community work.” Whilst they agreed with this statement, the remaining activists also argued that the use of pop culture probably make political activism seem more ‘cool’ and attractive to young people, as reflected in the comments of Informant 13, “I can see now that young people, we cannot go straight away to them and talk to them about political things and so on. We must use another way like using arts, movies, music and relate it to the current political situation.” Although agreeing that politics must be fun Informant 2 argued that “We should make it fun, but not too fun so that it lost its values.” This means that politics should not just be about fun and entertainment, but that there are important aspects that need to be taken seriously by the politicians, particularly in terms of listening to the voices and demands of young people.

5 Conclusion:

All in all, the analysis of the views of youth activists in contemporary Malaysia, showed firstly that most of the youth activists who were interviewed hold key resources such as being a highly educated person, coming from a predominantly middle-class background, being politically informed, and exhibiting strong political socialisations. Many received early political exposure from their family and educational institution, mainly university where the nature of the environments in which they grew up were surrounded by political and participatory norms. Such socialisation experiences, combined with the

availability of the movement networks, eased, and facilitated their route to activism, conforming the previous literature (Snow et al., 1980; McAdam, 1988) that these two aspects are important to ensure a smooth transition into activism. In terms of their views on politics, most youth activists were politically literate, have broad understanding of politics and possessed wide knowledge about current political situation in the country. Clearly, the majority of the activists started to actively participate in political activism at university, as student activists. Even though most of them have graduated, they still carry on their activism. To some extent, their motivations to political activism in Malaysia are significantly driven by instrumentality motives where activists have a strong belief that their participation could bring about change, as well as a sense of collective identity and strong attachment to specific groups and aided by the strong influence of social networking. Since participation in politics in Malaysia is somewhat risky and involves such a very high cost only those young people who are brave enough, have a high level of determination for democratic change, and a greater amount of resources are willing to take part in political activities. Typically, politically active young people possess in Malaysia vast knowledge on politics, effective socialising agents, and close relationships to political organisations, which in turn drive them to participate in high-risk political activism, including protests and social movements. Therefore, the gap between youth activists and young people at large in political participation will remain substantial unless the barriers to political participation can be successfully reduced. Therefore, to ensure more young people to be participated actively in Malaysian politics, routes for political participation need to be expanded, designed specifically to encourage greater and meaningful youth participation.

6 Acknowledgement:

Some findings in this article are partially based upon author's PhD thesis.

References

1. Abu Bakar, M. (1973) Mahasiswa menggugat: Suatu analisa dan peninjauan dari dalam terhadap kegiatan mahasiswa-mahasiswa negeri ini. Kuala Lumpur: Pustaka Antara.
2. Barnes, S., Kasse, M., Allerbeck, K., Farah, B., Heunks, F., Inglehart, R., Jennings, K., Klingermann, H., Marsh, A., & Rosenmayr, L. (eds). (1979) Political action: Mass participation in five Western democracies. London: Sage.
3. Clarke, H.D., Sanders, D., Stewart, M.C., & Whiteley, P. (2004) Political Choice in Britain. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
4. de Weerd, M., & Klandermans, P. G. (1999). Group Identification and social protest: Farmers' protest in the Netherlands. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 29, 1073-1095.
5. Flanagan, C.A., & Sherrod, L.R. (1998) Youth political development: An introduction. *Journal of Social Issues*, 54(3): 447-456.
6. Humphries, Stan. (2001) Who's afraid of the big, bad firm: The impact of economic scale on political participation. *American Journal of Political Science*, 45:678-699.
7. Hunt, S.A., & Benford, R.D. (2007) Collective identity, solidarity and commitment. In Snow, D.A., Soule, S.A., & Kriesi, H. (eds.). *The Blackwell companion to social movements*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing.
8. Hyman, H.H. (1959) Political socialization. New York: Free Press.
9. Jennings, M. K., Stoker, L., & Bowers, J. (2009). Politics across generations: family transmission re-examined. *Journal of Politics*, 71 (3): 780-799.
10. Karim, Hassan., & Hamid, Siti Nor. (1984) With the people: The Malaysian student movement, 1967-74. Petaling Jaya: Institut Analisa Sosial.
11. Klandermans, B. (1997) The social psychology of protest. Oxford: Blackwell.
12. Klandermans, B. (2004) The demand and supply of participation: Social-psychological correlates of participation in social movements. In Snow, D.A., Soule, S.A., and Kriesi, H. (eds.). *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing.
13. Klandermans, B. (2007) The demand and supply of participation: Social-psychological correlates of participation in social movements. In Snow, D.A., Soule, S.A., and Kriesi, H. (eds.). *The Blackwell companion to social movements*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing.

14. Lucan Way. (2014) The lessons of 1989. In: L. Diamond and M. F. Plattner (eds.). *Democratization and authoritarianism in the Arab world*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press.
15. Martin, B. (2007) Activism, social and political. In Gary L. Anderson & Kathryn G. Herr (eds.). *Encyclopedia of activism and social justice*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
16. McDevitt M., Butler M. (2011) Latino youth as information leaders: Implications for family interaction and civic engagement in immigrant communities.' *Interactions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies*, 7(2). <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/4757z113>. [Accessed 20th December 2016].
17. Melucci, A. (1995) The process of collective identity. In Johnston, H., & Klandermans, B. (eds.). *Social movements and culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
18. Muller, Edward., & Opp, Karl-Dieter. (1986). Rational choice and rebellious collective action. *American Political Science Review*, 80: 471-87.
19. Noorsulastryurni, A. (2014) Political rights: A shift or 'detour' in nationalism presence among Malaysia and Japan's youth. A paper presented at the International Conference for Academic Disciplines, 28-31 Oct 2014, Rome, Italy.
20. Norshuhada, S., Mohd Azizuddin, M. S., Shahizan, H., Mohd Khairie, A., Kartini, A. T. & Nuurrianti, Jalli. (2016). The effectiveness of social media in assisting opinion leaders to disseminate political ideologies in developing countries: The case of Malaysia. *Malaysian Journal of Communication*, 32(1): 233-260.
21. Offe, Claus. (1985) *New Social Movements: Challenging the Boundaries of Institutional Politics*. *Social Research*, 52 (4): 817-867.
22. Ramlah Adam. (2004) *Gerakan radikalisme di Malaysia 1938-1965*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa & Pustaka.
23. Riker, William H. & Peter C. Ordeshook. (1968) A theory of the calculus of voting. *American Political Science Review*, 62: 25-42.
24. Saliha, Hassan. (2002) Political non-governmental organisations: Ideals and reality. In Francis Loh Kok Wah & Khoo Boo Teik (eds.). *Democracy in Malaysia: Discourses and practices*. Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press.
25. Sigel, R. S. (1970) *Learning about politics: A reader in political socialization*. New York: Random House.
26. Stryker, S., Owens, T.J., & White, R. W. (2000) *Self, identity, and social movements*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
27. Taylor, V., & Whittier, N. (1992) Collective identity in social movement communities: Lesbian feminist mobilisation. In A.D Morris, C.M. Mueller (eds.). *Frontiers in social movement theory*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
28. Tilly, C. (1978). *From mobilization to revolution*. Reading: Addison-Wesley.
29. Torres, M.A. (2006) *Youth activists in the age of postmodern globalization: Notes from an ongoing project*. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago.
30. Van Deth, Jan W. (2001) *Studying political participation: Towards a theory of everything?* Paper presented at the Joint Sessions of Workshops of the European Consortium for Political Research, Grenoble, 6-11 April 2001.
31. Van Stekelenburg, J., & Klandermans, B. (2007) Individuals in movements: A social psychology of contention. In B. Klandermans & C. Roggeband (eds.). *The Handbook Social Movements across Disciplines*. New York: Springer.
32. Verba, S., Schlozman K. & Brady, H. (1995) *Voice and equality. Civic voluntarism in American politics*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
33. Weinstein, M. (2005) *A comparative analysis of youth activism in mainstream political parties and social movements in Britain*. PhD Thesis. Nottingham Trent University.
34. Weiss, M. L. (2011) *Student activism in Malaysia: Crucible, mirror, sideshow*. Ithaca, and Singapore: Cornell Southeast Asia Program and NUS Press.