VIEWS ON STUDENT POLITICAL FREEDOM POST-UUCA AMENDMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION OF UNDI18: A CASE STUDY OF PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES IN SOUTHERN MALAYSIA

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Abstract: In the 65 years since gaining independence, Malaysia's political landscape has seen significant growth in student activism, particularly in terms of student political freedom in public universities. The 1960s and 1970s were regarded as the golden age of student movements in Malaysia, marking the peak of student political freedom. However, the enactment of the Universities and University Colleges Act 1971 (UUCA) suppressed all political activities by students. Recently, two important developments took place, namely the amendment of UUCA in 2019, which has allowed students to engage in political activities inside and outside the campus, and the implementation of Undi18, which has rekindled students' political freedom. This study examines the views and understanding of the informants regarding the concept and practice of student political freedom. This study also highlights the existing values associated with student political freedom. The research design employed in this article is qualitative and conducted through a case study. We interviewed 15 informants from Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia, Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia, and Universiti Teknologi Malaysia. The concept of student political freedom was perceived as encompassing freedom of speech, freedom of associations, and the right to vote. Current practices of student political freedom include the use of social media platforms, political participation, and the formation of associations. In terms of student political freedom, the informants emphasised values of social responsibility, integrity, and intellectualism. In essence, this study presents findings on the current political scene in public universities post-UUC amendment and the passing of Undi18 bill, which purportedly create a more conducive democratic space for student political freedom.

Keywords: Universities and University Colleges Act 1971 (UUCA) , democracy, student political freedom, sustainability, Undi18.

Introduction

As a democratic state, Malaysia guarantees the freedom of its people. Democracy provides citizens with equal opportunities to participate in decision-making processes, especially in terms of political involvement. Robert Dahl in his work "Poliarchy: Participation and Opposition", asserts that political participation is an essential component of modern democracies as it enables citizens to hold their governments accountable (Dahl, 2008). However, Weiss (2020) argued that this definition primarily pertains to actions within a nation's established institutional framework. To many political scientists, political participation encompasses "voluntary activities undertaken by the mass public to influence public policy, either directly or by affecting the selection of persons who make policies" (Uhlaner, 2015, p. 504). Political participation can manifest in various forms, including voting in elections, assisting political campaigns, contributing financially to a candidate or cause, contacting officials, petitioning, participating in protests, and collaborating with others on key issues.

Student political participation has been a central focus for political scientists and policymakers alike. In Malaysia, there are 20 public universities, 26 polytechnics, and 105 community colleges, along with 434 private higher education institutions, making a total of 595 of higher education institutions under the purview of Ministry of Higher Education. As of 2021, a report from the Policy Planning and Research Division (2022) indicates that a total of 1,207,131 students were enrolled in public and private universities. These cohorts are considered assets and co-constructors of civil society, and their presence and involvement in all aspects of life are crucial. University students also serve as agents for socio-political change. It is undeniable that students have played a longstanding role in shaping the political landscape and driving changes (Hed, 2020). Student political participation does not occur in a vacuum but often arises from social crises within a country. There is compelling evidence of the impact of student political participation, such as the pro-democracy movement in South Korea in 1987, the campaign to overthrow Suharto in Indonesia in 1998, and the Egyptian uprising in 2011. In colonised states, student political participation was fuelled by nationalism, and the struggle for independence often featured significant student involvement in the fight against colonial rule (Altbach, 1989).

Having said that, it is a fact that political participation is the essence of democracy. As emphasised by Dahl (2008), every member of a society in a democratic constitution is equally entitled to participate in the political decision-making processes. Therefore, this underscores the notion that the involvement of students in the national politics enhances the the democracy of that nation. Glazer (1967) provided his justifications for the significance of students in the national democratic process based on three main premises:

> *The first position….it is the student should learn about all the problems of the society and in effect prepare himself to act in the society. The second position is that the student should actively participate in the political and social conflict of the society. The society needs him as the student is better educated, less bound by responsibility of occupation and family, more generous and more flexible in his political and social attitudes, than other citizens. The third position on the student's role in a democratic society raises the most serious considerations. The third position is that the university campus is a key source of activists for the various and social positions in conflict in society. Thus according to this position, the campus should be open to active requirement and preparation of students for enlistment and leadership in the significant political and social camps of society.*

Recent studies have further supported and advocated for the involvement of students in political participation, as students are seen as agents of youth responsible for overseeing the democratic transition towards a more substantive one (Djumadin, 2021). To uphold the political ethics in the democratic process, Wringe (2012), Sutrisman (2019) and Yin and Dan (2020) have suggested that students should possess attributes such as strong commitment, determination, and consistency in their pursuit of ideals for the benefit of the community, nation, and state. Students also uphold the integrity of moral and ethical values. Additionally, students must demonstrate strong competence in identifying and formulating problems and finding solutions. Furthermore, students should have constituencies comprising support and networks that enable them to exert influence on other parties.

Many argue that student political participation may diminish in the era of higher education massification. This is often attributed to factors such as the diverse student population, part-time study arrangements for many students, the non-elite social backgrounds of most students, the increasingly high cost of higher education in many countries, which can hinder students from engaging politically and socially

(Altbach & Klemencic, 2014). However, are these claims well-founded? Student political participation continues to thrive despite persistent repression by governments and authorities. It remains a dynamic and influential political and social force. The manner in which students are involved has evolved, transitioning from hierarchical structures to more loosely structured forms.

Student political participation, like any other form of political engagement, is influenced by the norms, cultures, and values of the local society. This study aims to delve into the concept of student political freedom, pinpoint current practices, and underscore the underlying values associated with this movement.

Literature Review

Student political participation in Malaysia

Student political participation is a global phenomenon that has existed for centuries. An imperative spectrum of the student voice, student political participation could be understood as "the involvement of individual students in group activities aimed at defending their interests and bring about changes in systems, policies, attitudes, knowledge, and behaviours regarding issues affecting universities of society at large" (Garwe, 2017). Student political participation carries the whole gamut on various social-economic and political issues occurring at national and regional levels.

Malaysia has a long-standing history of student political participation with numerous impactful events. The root of student political participation can be traced back as early as the pre-*Merdeka* (independence) period of the 1930s. Notably, activism was mainly initiated and concentrated among students at the tertiary level, specifically at the University of Malaya, which was then located in Singapore. Weiss (2005) distinguished four waves of student political participation in Malaysia. The first wave occurred from 1930s to 1950s, characterised by activism centred around communism, Malay radicalism and issues of national and/or ethnic identity (Weiss, 2005). This phenomenon cut across Malay, Chinese, and Indian students alike. Among Malay students, political participation began relatively mildly, with the formation of student associations, publications, and, to a certain extent, political clubs. Malay students were underrepresented in universities and their activism was limited to journalism and teaching. This led students from Sultan Idris Training College to found Kesatuan Melayu Muda (Young Malay Union, KMM), an anti-colonial and nationalist union that aimed to unite Malays regardless of class, state, or ethnic group. KMM was unique in its hostility towards the British and the Malay ruling class.

The political participation of Chinese students was largely a response to developments in Mainland China. Chinese school teachers played a role in fuelling anti-imperialist sentiments throughout the 1920s and 1920s, leading to anti-Japanese demonstrations (Tan, 1997). During this period, there was a growing left-wing sentiment among UM students. They founded a radical publication *Malayan Orchid* in affiliation with the Anti-British League (ABL) in 1949, although it only lasted for a short period. Consequently, this wave produced some notable student organisations, such as Peninsular Malay Student' Union (Gabungan Pelajar Melayu Semenanjung, or GPMS), University of Malaya Students' Union (UMSU), and the National Union of Malaysian Students (PKBM). These organisations were successfully institutionalised during the pre-Independence period (Weiss, 2005). As Malaya approached its independence, student political participation increasingly focused on the issues of citizenship, nationalism, language, and education.

The beginning of the second wave of student political participation in the 1960s to mid-1970s witnessed a slight shift in trend. With the new establishment of the Universiti Malaya campus in 1959, participation focused more on student welfare and campus than on national politics, as seen in the previous wave (Hassan, 1984, p.1). For instance, Weiss (2011) reported that students in UM openly demanded for a

mosque on campus and protested the denial of a police permit to organise campus programmes. However, the late 1960s and early 1970s marked the growth of student political participation. This was fuelled by numerous of student organisations and clubs that actively engaged in activism beyond the campus and demonstrated solidarity with marginalised communities. The 1963 Malaysia-Indonesia conflict, known as *Konfrontasi*, became an initial indicator of students' involvement in external issues. Students orchestrated protests as an expression of loyalty to the country. At the same time, these student organisations took initiated volunteer programmes in rural areas for community development work, educational outreach, and related activities (Gopikumar, 1972, p 22; Kee, 1976, p 29-31, 41-43). Kee (1976) reported that these initiatives were politically motivated, as students were trained to work with impoverished and oppressed peasant masses while seeking racial integration.

Historical analysis showed that student political participation responded to various social and economic issues through protests. For example, the Baling protest of 1974 represented students' solidarity with poor rubber tappers in Baling, who were struggling with rising inflation and the cost of living. The protest served as a scathing critique of the government's failure in its economic development strategies (Weiss, 2005). The Baling protest demanded measures to curb inflation, an increase of rubber price, and punishment for corrupt government officials. Unfortunately, the government responded to the protest with violence, arresting protesters who had sought refuge in Masjid Negara. Worse, the police invaded the campuses of UM, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Institut Teknologi MARA, and Nantah in Singapore, leading to the arrest of two dozen of lecturers and students under the Internal Security Act (ISA). According to Hassan (1984), this incident marked the decline of student activism in Malaysia. The government also imposed stricter restrictions by amending the Universities and University Colleges Act (UUCA) of 1971 in 1975. Despite UUCA's significance as a legal framework for higher education institutions, the act significantly curtailed university and student autonomy, increasing governmental control over university affairs.

The third wave of student political participation emerged in the late 1970s in response to legislative amendments arising from previous student protest. During this period, Malaysia was under the governance of the newly formed political coalition, *Barisan National* (National Front, BN), which placed a primary focus on economic development and students were increasingly encouraged to orient their studies towards industry-linked research (Weiss, 2011). However, due to restricted political mobility and engagement, religious activities became an outlet for students to channel their political expressions and organise on campus. Weiss (2011) regarded this wave as the "Islamic resurgence" that began in the early 1970s, spearheaded by young, Western-educated Muslims and Malays who enrolled local universities en masse. This event was driven mainly by the New Economic Policy, which allocated quotas and scholarships. Islamic organisations that emerged during this wave included ABIM, IR, Darul Arqam and Jamaat Tabligh. Although they might differ in their political approach, they all shared a common tendency to base their critical analyses of social issues on religious principles (Zain, 2022).

Moving into the early 1990s, Malaysia followed the global trend of corporatisation and privatisation of higher education institutions. This shift led to the recognition of more private higher education establishments and increased admissions of non-Malay students. By the late 1990s, student activism experienced a resurgence, albeit amid repression and shifting institutional dynamics. At the same time, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) began to proliferate, offering new avenues for collective action and alliances. Despite their registration as NGOs under the Registrar of Youth Societies, these groups were not exempt from restrictions imposed by various legal acts, including the Youth Societies and Youth Development Act (2007), UUCA (1971 onwards), and

Educational Institutions (Discipline) Act (1976). These challenges were further compounded by contemporary obstacles such as social stigma, the struggle to maintain relevance, and political pressure. To navigate this constrained democratic space, students adapted and refined their approaches, organising demonstrations, forums, and campus elections. During this period, students political participation was strongly influenced by the ideals of the Reformasi movement led by Anwar Ibrahim. Anwar Ibrahim's call for justice resonated with students, emboldening them to engage in street protests in city centers (Weiss, 2011). Inspired by Reformasi, students vociferously demanded the abolition of ISA and the repeal of UUCA.

The early 2010s ushered in a distinct wave of student political participation, fuelled by the advancement of the internet and various digital technologies. These new avenues for activism allowed political expressions to be conveyed conveniently through actions, such as clicking or sharing links, as noted by Butler (2011) and Christensen (2012). Consequently, this wave earned the labels of "slacktivism" and "clicktivism". Despite their passive nature, slacktivism and clicktivism proved effective in mobilising political agendas in Malaysia, exemplified by movements like Occupy Dataran, Coalition for Free and Fair Elections 2.0 (BERSIH 2.0), and *Himpunan Hijau*. Ku Hasnita (2011) reported that these campaigns garnered significant engagement and widespread support, particularly among the youth. Nonetheless, UUCA still looms as a restrictive force, dictating limitations on political activities within campuses and other activities deemed "detrimental or prejudicial to the interests, well-being, or good name of the university, any of the students, staff, officers, or employees of the university". The following section delves into a more detailed discussion of UUCA. In essence, student political participation in Malaysia has traversed various waves from the pre-Independence era to the present day, as outlined in the report by Imagined Malaysia (2020).

Initially, student political participation served as a tool to challenge colonial powers in the 1930s, followed by a left-wing wave centred on social justice and wealth distribution in the 1960s to the early 1970s, then transitioning to the Islamic resurgence in the late 1970s through the early 1990s, and finally evolving into a liberalising wave focused on issues related to democracy and civil liberties. It has been suggested that these shifts in waves were closely linked to the development of the higher education system.

From the preceding discussion, student political participation in Malaysia's contemporary democracy can be examined through two distinct perspectives: Conventional and non-conventional participation. Conventional participation encompasses all modes of involvement directly incorporated into legal institutional frameworks, or those directly related to the electoral process and representative system. This includes activities such as voting, contacting politicians, or attending hearings. In contrast, unconventional political participation encompasses all modes of political involvement not formally connected to the electoral process, such as petitioning and demonstrating (Barnes & Kaase, 1979). For all Malaysian citizens, the right to political participation is governed by Article 10 of the Federal Constitution of Malaysia, which guarantees freedom of speech, right to assembly, and right to form associations:

Subject to Clauses (2), (3) and (4) –

(a) Every citizen has the right to freedom of speech and expression;
(b) All citizens have the right to assemble peaceably and without arms;
(c) All citizens have the right to form associations.

However, it must be noted that the above Clauses state that the Parliament may by law impose restrictions on the rights in paragraph (a), (b) and (c), in the event that it is deemed necessary in the interest of protecting national security, friendly relations with other countries, public order or morality, privileges of Parliament or of any Legislative Assembly or to provide against contempt of court, defamation, or incitement to any offence.

However, political participation within the campus context is regulated by a different legislative act, UUCA. The act deals with matters related to the establishment, maintenance and administration of universities and university colleges, as well as other related matters. With regard to student political participation on and off campus, the 2019 amendment to UUCA granted university students the right to be involved in political activities on campus. This amendment put a halt to any ongoing disciplinary action against students for their participation in on-campus political activities (Hidir Reduan, 2018). The current UUCA amendment has undeniably provided a more conducive and democratic environment for university students, guaranteeing their right to freedom of speech, the right to form associations, and the right to assemble. Furthermore, at the national level, university students now have the right to vote in state and general elections. Additionally, with the passing of the Undi18 bill, the voting age was lowered from 21 years old to 18 years old, and eligible voters were automatically registered. These reforms have led to a significant increase in new voters, totalling six million people since the last general election in 2018 (Harrison, 2022). UUCA and Undi18 are further discussed in the next section.

The recent 15th General Election in November 2022 marked a significant milestone as Anwar Ibrahim, the figurehead of the Reformasi movement, was appointed as Malaysia's new prime minister after 25 years of advocating for reform. Will there be substantial developments in student political participation under his leadership? Or will students continue to grapple with the constraints of the UUCA? Ultimately, the freedom of political expression through student political participation is indicative of a healthy democracy.

Universities and University Colleges Act 1971

The Universities and University Colleges Act (Akta Universiti dan Kolej Universiti, UUCA) 1971 is the main legal structural framework that governs all public universities in Malaysia.

It was first enacted in 1971 and has been amended seven times in 1971, 1975, 1983, 1996, 2009, 2012, and 2019. The enactment and its amendment brought significant implications for the development of higher education and universities in Malaysia, mainly the governance of public institutions, their degree of autonomy and the state-university relationship (Wan, 2019).

The pivotal moment that led to the enactment of the UUCA was the May 13, 1969, racial riots, which left lasting scars on Malaysian society and reshaped the social, political, and economic landscape. Following the racial riots that erupted in Kuala Lumpur, a state of emergency was swiftly declared. This event marked the beginning of a significant shift in the governance of universities. In 1971, universities were placed under the Emergency (Essential Powers) Ordinance No. 74, laying the foundation for the subsequent UUCA. The primary purpose behind the enactment of the UUCA in 1971 was to establish a legal framework for universities and formalise the relationship between the state and these institutions (Wan, 2019). The early years of UUCA under the BN administration were characterised as repressive, with student organisations being effectively halted for an extended period. Moreover, student activists faced arrests without trial, suspensions, expulsions from universities, and imprisonment (Karunungan, 2021).

The fundamental challenge posed by UUCA lies in the substantial control exercised by both the state and government, as stipulated in Section 15 and Section 16, respectively. These sections delineate the prohibitions imposed on students' activities and grant significant authority to university councils with regard to student organisations (Wan, 2019). Students are also restricted from establishing any political affiliation with political parties or trade unions. The history of UUCA, from its initial enactment to its current amendment, reflects a continuous evolution. The 1971 UUCA was widely perceived as highly restrictive, as it prohibited students from expressing even the slightest

support, sympathy, or opposition to any political party, whether Malaysian or foreign. In contrast, the most recent amendment has created more room for political freedom. This section will provide insights into UUCA through discussions of the amendments made in 2009, 2012, and 2018, which have brought about significant changes in student political participation in Malaysia.

The 2009 UUCA amendment was initiated following the launch of the National Higher Education Strategic Plan (PSPTN) 2007-2020 by the Ministry of Higher Education. PSPTN placed a stronger emphasis on a greater level of autonomy and accountability, aiming to enable public universities to compete with prominent higher education institutions globally. The 2009 amendment introduced significant changes, specifically in Section 15, which included the abolition of criminal penalties, the decriminalisation of student discipline, the extension of disciplinary authority to cover university academics, staff, and employees, and the transfer of authority from the ministry to the university in matters pertaining to student administration (Imagined Malaysia, 2020).

Following the 2009 amendment, there was a notable increase in student political participation, particularly in political activities and involvement in NGOs. An incident that garnered significant attention was the detention of four students from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia during a by-election in April 2010. These students were subjected to disciplinary proceedings by the university under Section 15(5)(a) of UUCA, which prohibited students from expressing support for political parties and participating in politics. This case, widely known as the UKM 4, drew widespread media and academic scrutiny. Subsequently, the courts ruled that Section 15(6)(a) of the UUCA was in contradiction with Article 119 of the Federal Constitution, which guarantees every citizen over 21 the right to vote and signifies freedom of expression and participation in politics (Wan, 2019; Imagined Malaysia, 2020). This ruling laid the foundation for the 2012 amendment, which aimed to relax control over students' participation in politics on campus.

In Malaysia's 14th General Election, *Pakatan Harapan*, in its manifesto, pledged to repeal UUCA completely. While it seemed promising, students were yet to be granted full rights to engage in activism as the 2012 amendment outlawed any political activities on campus. It is regrettable that the reality of student political participation appeared to remain largely unchanged despite six amendments to UUCA.

The 2019 UUCA amendment represents a significant change in student political participation. This latest amendment, passed by Malaysia's Parliament in July 2019, removed restrictions on political activities by students on campus. University students now have more freedom to participate in political activities, provided they do not cause harm or chaos on campus. Additionally, the 2019 amendment stated that any ongoing disciplinary actions against students for participating in on-campus political activities under the Act are no longer in effect. This victory is celebrated by university students across the nation, as they are no longer afraid to voice their opinions and stand up for their rights (Hidir Reduan, 2018).

In spite of this, calls for the repeal of UUCA have resurfaced, with movements such as *Pakatan Harapan's* youth wing and the Malaysian United Democratic Alliance (MUDA) demanding the current government to repeal UUCA and grant total autonomy to university students for their political participation (Mustafa, 2022; Ganesan, 2023). Higher Education Minister Datuk Seri Mohamed Khaled Nordin has emphasised the importance of the UUCA in governing the establishment and administration of universities, and he expressed concerns that repealing it may result in the nullification of the establishment and administration of 20 public universities (Sinar Daily, 2023). However, both Khaled and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim agree that certain provisions that put pressure on students and lecturers should be carefully examined for potential amendments (Radhi & Suraya, 2023).

Undi18

Malaysia's political system, rooted in its colonial history, particularly under British rule, continues to reflect the influence of a Westminster-style parliamentary system (Ostwald, 2017). Administratively, Malaysia adheres to a federal structure, dividing powers between the federal and state levels. The Federal Constitution allocates substantial powers and major revenue sources to the federal government. The monarchy plays a distinctive role in Malaysia's governance. The king, known as the *Yang di-Pertuan Agong,* is elected for a five-year term, following a rotation among the hereditary royal rulers of nine out of the 11 states in Peninsular Malaysia. The remaining four states, without royal rulers, have a head of state known as the *Yang di-Pertua Negeri*, appointed for four-year terms by the *Yang di-Pertuan Agong* in consultation with the state's chief minister. These rulers and state heads together form the Conference of Rulers. Each of Malaysia's 13 states has a unicameral State Legislative Assembly called the *Dewan Undangan Negeri*. In contrast, the federal parliament consists of two chambers: The Senate (Dewan Negara) and the directly elected House of Representatives (Dewan Rakyat). Typically, both the federal parliament and state legislatures have five-year terms, unless they are dissolved earlier. Elections are held at intervals not exceeding five years. Malaysia's parliamentary system operates with the leader of the political party or coalition holding the majority of seats in either the federal parliament or a state legislative assembly. This leader is appointed by the titular head (Yang di-Pertuan Agong at the federal level or state heads at the state level) to form the government. Additionally, Malaysia is divided into 222 parliamentary constituencies, each represented by a Member of Parliament (MP).

In Malaysian general elections, eligible voters must meet certain requirements. These include being at least 21 years old, being a registered voter without disqualifications due to mental incapacity or criminal convictions, and being a Malaysian citizen residing overseas, provided they have registered as overseas voters. However, at the beginning of 2022, the Malaysian government took a significant step by implementing Undi18 (Vote18), which reduced the minimum voting age from 21 to 18 years old. The Undi18 initiative originated as a youth movement and eventually led to the successful amendment of Article 119 (1) of the Federal Constitution. This historic constitutional amendment was unanimously approved in both the Upper and Lower Houses of Parliament, without any abstention. The bill aimed to achieve several key objectives, including lowering the minimum voting age for both federal and state elections to 18 years old, lowering the minimum age for elected representatives in both federal and state elections to 18 years old, and introducing automatic voter registration for Malaysians. Consequently, this amendment is expected to result in an annual increase of 1.2 million new voters (Berita Harian, 2019).

After the enactment of the law, both the *Pakatan Harapan* government and Election Commission (EC) had initially agreed that the act should be fully implemented by July 2021 at the latest. This timeline was maintained even after a change in administration when the new *Perikatan Nasional* government took office in March 2020. However, in March 2021, EC announced that the act could not be implemented according to the previous timeline. The delay was attributed to the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic and logistical considerations, particularly concerning the simultaneous implementation of Automatic Voting Registration (AVR) and Undi18. In response to the delay, members of Undi18 organisation applied for a judicial review against the government and EC's decision not to bring the Undi18 constitutional amendment into effect by July 2021. Their application was filed against the prime minister, the government of Malaysia and EC in the High Court of Kuala Lumpur and High Court of Kuching (Juliana Ganendra, 2021). In September 2021, the Kuching High Court, through a judicial review, ordered the federal government to lower the voting age to 18 years by the end of December

2021. Following this decision, the government did not file an appeal against the Kuching High Court's ruling and complied with the court's directive (Timothy, 2021).

The passing of the Undi18 bill has demonstrated that Malaysian students and youth constitute a formidable political force. It carries several significant implications for student political participation, both at the university and national levels. In essence, Undi18 has led to increased political engagement among young people, encouraging them to become more active participants in the democratic process. This, in turn, contributes to a more inclusive and representative democracy. Undi18 may also influence a shift in political priorities. With more young voters included in the electoral process, existing political parties may need to adjust their policies to better align with the concerns and interests of younger generations, particularly in areas related to education and sociocultural aspects (Gibaja, 2020; Chai, 2022).

Undi18 has assumed a crucial political role in the Malaysian political landscape. It illustrates that both students and younger generations are enthusiastic about participating in decision-making processes. Our political environment is characterised by fragmentation, and young citizens, like their elders, are divided along ideological and partisan lines (Faiz, 2021; Weiss, 2022). Lowering the voting age provides youth with the opportunity to elect their leaders. Younger generations have often been neglected and marginalised, with their voices and opinions not receiving adequate amplification. In a democratic nation, the right to vote should not be limited solely by age (Othman, Yusoff, Awang & Jupiter, 2016b). This viewpoint is supported by Irma Wani *et al.* (2022), who argue that involving young voters in the national democratic process enhances their credibility.

The 2022 Johor state election marked the first real test for Undi18. It saw a significant increase of 173,177 new voters (Mohd Azlim, 2022). However, the voter turnout was rather disappointing, with only approximately five percent recorded, as reported by Sinar Harian (Raiham, 2022). In a report by Free Malaysia Today, the low voter turnout was primarily attributed to a lack of interest and a desire to participate in the state election. Additionally, young voters seemed to have a lack of trust in political institutions and parties, questioning the importance of their votes. Furthermore, there was no active promotion of Undi18 by the Election Commission in Johor (Fong, 2022). The long-awaited 15th Malaysia General Election provided another significant test for Undi18. A total of 1.2 million voters aged 18 to 20 years old were eligible under Undi18. The voter turnout appeared to be significantly higher at 75%. Collectively, these young voters were expected to have a substantial impact on Malaysia's political landscape.

Methodology

This paper employs a qualitative approach by adopting in-depth interviews as the primary research instrument. The study was conducted at three public universities in the southern region of Peninsular Malaysia, which were Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (Negeri Sembilan), Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia (Johor), and Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (Johor). Fifteen informants (N=15) were purposively sampled based on the following inclusion criteria:

(a) Informants should be currently enrolled as students in the selected public universities. This would guarantee that the study focused on individuals who were actively experiencing the university environment and its policies regarding political freedom.

(b) Informants should be individuals who actively participate in campus politics. This meant that they could be a representative of the student council, student association, and/or politics-related club. Informants with exposure and experience in campus politics would provide diverse perspectives and develop comprehensive solutions to current challenges within the campus.

(c) Informants should voluntarily agree to participate in this study. Hence, informed consent was obtained from each informant, ensuring that they understood the purpose of the study, the potential risks, and their rights as informants.

(d) Another criterion for the informants is language proficiency. In this matter, informants should have at least a professional working level of proficiency in Malay and/or English to facilitate communication during the online interview sessions.

(e) In addition to student informants, this study also involved students' affair officers to provide insights particularly into institutional policies, regulations, and practices that influenced students' political freedom.

The 15 participants were likely selected to represent a diverse range of perspectives within the context of the southern zone of Peninsula Malaysia. By including students and students' affairs officers from three different universities, the study may capture variations in political freedom experiences across different institutions. Furthermore, the sample size of 15 participants might have been determined based on the available time, resources, and practical constraints of the study. Conducting in-depth interviews and data analysis can be time-consuming, and a smaller sample size may have been more manageable within the study's timeframe. In addition, a case study like this often prioritises depth over breadth. By focusing on a limited number of informants, the authors were able to engage in a more thorough analysis of each individual's experiences, allowing for richer and more detailed insights. Furthermore, 15 informants were proven to be an adequate sample for this case study as a point of saturation was achieved. This was noticed as codes and themes began to recur consistently in the data.

In this study, the use of gatekeepers played a pivotal role in facilitating access to potential informants. Gatekeepers, often key individuals within a research setting, are essential for gaining entry to the field, and this approach is a common and valuable strategy in qualitative research. Given that the data collection for this study took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, which restricted physical travel and face-to-face interactions, the role of gatekeepers became even more crucial. To identify and connect with potential informants who met the study's inclusion criteria, the authors identified key gatekeepers within each university. In this context, the gatekeepers were the student affairs officers. These individuals were not only familiar with the university environment but also had access to the students who could contribute valuable insights to the study. The researchers initiated contact with these gatekeepers and provided them with detailed information about the research objectives and the nature of the study. This transparent communication ensured that the gatekeepers understood the purpose and significance of the research. Following this, the gatekeepers were given a specific timeframe to identify potential informants who matched the study's criteria. Once potential informants were identified, the gatekeepers played a crucial role in facilitating communication between the research team and the students. This involved arranging and coordinating the online interview sessions with each individual.

The data collection for 15 universities in the southern zone took place from June to August 2021. During this period, Malaysia was experiencing a severe COVID-19 outbreak. Therefore, data collection was conducted through online interviews. The platform used to conduct these interviews was the video conferencing software Zoom. Each online interview was recorded with the consent of the informants. Soon after the interview sessions ended, the transcription process took place. In this case, the video files were converted to text format in a manuscript form. Once all the manuscripts were ready, the authors began generating the initial codes. This process, known as coding, required the authors to identify specific pieces of text that were relevant to the research questions and assign labels or codes to them. This process

allowed the data to be organised into smaller and manageable units. From the initial codes formed earlier, the authors then proceeded to identify potential themes. This was done by looking at the commonalities, repeated ideas, or significant phrases that captured the essence of the data. Data analysis is not a one-way process. In this instance, codes and themes were always reviewed and refined to ensure that they were comprehensive, coherent, and distinct from one another. All these processes were achieved with the use of qualitative data analysis software NVivo 12.

The authors conducted data validation through member checking. In this instance, upon completion of data analysis, the informants were again contacted to validate or correct the data interpretations. This process essentially strengthened the credibility of the findings. The authors also took another approach through reflexibility by acknowledging the authors' influence on the study and how our personal beliefs, biases, and experiences may shape the analysis. By engaging in self-reflection, the authors were able to mitigate potential bias and improve the trustworthiness of the research.

This study holds significant relevance in an ever-evolving political landscape for several reasons. Firstly, this study addresses an important issue by exploring the students' political freedom especially in the post-UUCA amendment era. It sheds lights on the extent to which students can express their political beliefs, engage in political activities, and ultimately exercise their rights as a citizen within and out of the campus setting. In addition, the findings of this study can have implications for policymaking and governance in higher education institutions. Amendments to UUCA and the implementation of Undi18 have legally allowed for a better democratic space in public universities to exercise. Therefore, this study provides insights into the current scenario of political freedom at public universities, in which further improvements and enhancements may be boosted. The case study contributes significantly to the existing body of knowledge on political freedom in educational settings, particularly in Malaysia. It contributes to the literature on student activism, freedom of expression, and democratic values in higher education.

The strength of this study lies in its detailed and in-depth exploration of the topic. By focusing on three specific universities, the study provides rich insights into the experiences and perspectives of students regarding political freedom. Another strength of this study is the multiple perspectives it examines, in which informants recruited at each university comprised both students and students' affair management. Moreover, the students' backgrounds were diverse as they were either a representative of student councils, NGOs, political-related associations or loosely-structured organisations. In essence, this led to a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities related to political freedom on and off campus. As the study was conducted at three universities in the southern zone of Peninsular Malaysia, it offers contextual specificity. This localised approach may offer nuanced insights that might not be apparent in broader, cross-national studies.

The authors also acknowledge that this study is bound to several limitations. Due to the nature of case studies and the specific context of the study, the findings may not be easily generalisable to other universities or regions. The experiences of students' political freedom in private universities or institutions outside the southern zone of Peninsular Malaysia may differ significantly. The study's sample size, five informants from each university, might be considered relatively small. While case studies often prioritise depth over breadth, a larger sample could have provided a more diverse range of perspectives. As with any research, the study's findings are relevant to the time of data collection. Changes in university policies, political climate, or student demographics might impact the current relevance of the findings in the future.

Findings and Discussion

Understanding of the Meaning of Student Political Freedom

This paper has previously delved into the historical waves of student political participation in Malaysia, which began as a quest against British colonialism in the 1930s, followed by the emergence of left-wing and radical sentiments in the 1960s to the early 70s, then shifting towards an Islamic revival in the late 1970s through the early 90s, and ultimately transitioning into a liberalising wave focused on democracy and civil liberties. These trends corroborate the ideas of Luzzato (1997), who suggested that youth activism in the past was heavily influenced by idealism, altruism, and rebellions.

The interpretation of student political freedom is rooted in freedom of association, freedom of speech, and political openness. In essence, informants articulated their perspectives that were in agreement of the Article 10 of Federal Constitution and the tenets of democracy. Article 10 (1) specifies that (a) every citizen has the right to freedom of speech and expression; (b) all citizens have the right to assemble peaceably and without arms; and (c) all citizens have the right to form associations.

In freedom of associations, many responded that university students should be granted the right to participate in any political party of their choosing. This can be seen in the response of informant UTM 2:

> *Student political freedom implies students are allowed to participate in a political party without any restriction from the authorities. They also should be able to express their opinions on political affairs and development, or interact with politicians.*

Another response from USIM 1 states that:

> *I view student political freedom as "hizbiyah", meaning partisanship. In the context of a university campus, students could show support to political parties, such as UMNO, PAS, Pakatan Harapan, and so on.*

A further response from USIM 3 shared the similar notion:

> *Students are free to express their support to any political party they subscribe to, be it the government or opposition party.*

Freedom of speech is also perceived to be a part of student political freedom. Substantial academic work has been devoted to freedom of speech, conceptualising it as one of the basic pillars of a system based on the law of a free society (Mia *et al.,* 2021). The essence of free speech is that there are no limits; individuals can express their opinions and ideas without restraint. In the context of student political freedom, freedom of speech represents students' capacity to voice out their concerns and approach the higher-ups for problem solving and conflict resolution. Informant UTM 4 stated his view:

> *Freedom to speak out, express opinions, and interact with one another. Meaning that there is no restriction, for instance, when students intend to file a petition. That's the space and opportunity that should be given by the university.*

Student political freedom was also viewed through the lens of political openness, a concept that signifies the extent to which a political system is capable of offering a response to preferences of university students as defined by Gonzalez Garibay *et al.* (2008). In this regard, political openness was seen from the perspective of involvement of political figures or entities in campus activities. Informant USIM 2 stated that:

> *From the point of view of students' political freedom, we see that this political freedom means that we are given the freedom to carry out anything that involves political education, the ability to initiate a movement, whether through social media or physical gatherings, so that we can disseminate information to students without any warning or restrictions from the university or the government.*

Being an entity of knowledge producer, informants viewed that universities should be a platform for political discourse, irrespective of political parties and figures.

This perspective suggests that political engagement and participation within universities should be inclusive, avoiding alignment with the government of the day. UTHM 1 articulated this viewpoint:

> *I see student political freedom in terms of organising forums or political discourse. The forum does not involve political parties that are from the current government only, but involves both the government and the opposition.*

Current Practices of Students' Political Participation

Based on the responses, students were permitted to establish or expand a political division club as mentioned by informant UTHM 3:

> *There are many political clubs being formed. Upon the amendment of UUCA, one of the clubs that began to become active was UMNO Siswa UTHM. With the relaxation of UUCA, they immediately registered themselves under the university.*

Overall, current practices in student political participation reflected there was a healthy participation in campus politics. One indicator that portrayed this situation was the voter turnout in campus elections. Informant USM 4 mentioned that:

> *In the context of USIM, the voter turnout has maintained a high percentage for many years. Our recent election, although through an online system, recorded an 81 percent turnout. I conclude that our students exercised their right to vote, electing credible candidates that could lead them.*

Discussions on political matters were carried out in lectures between students and lecturers. Informant UTHM 1 mentioned that:

> *We openly discussed political matters during classes. At UTHM, we have several subjects that allowed us to on the country's current political situations. I observe that the students are eager to engage in such discussions. Moreover, our lecturers are welcoming and understand the needs of today's students, in which they have the right to be informed of the reality. Being a student representative myself, we initiate forums and discussion sessions, such as student conferences, in which we raise whatever issues or concerns from the students.*

However, student political participation in universities was bound by certain university regulations. In this case, the university strictly controlled the influence of political influence and insisted that the students remained neutral. This was explained by informant UTM 5:

> *UTM and universities in the Klang Valley might have different perspectives on political freedom in the campus. Our university regulates external political influence to curb fanaticism. It is true that we have 'Pro-Mahasiswa' and 'Pro-Evolusi' associations, each serving as a mirror of the government and the opposition. But, everything is done within our rules and terms. We do not bring the political culture of universities in the Klang Valley in our campuses.*

Students directly participating in politics on campus were strictly prohibited. Informant UTM 5 explained a case where a student leader organised a programme that involved a political figure on campus:

> *It is practically impossible to involve any political party or figure on campus. We had a case last year, where a student leader collaborated with an UMNO division to deliver face masks during the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak. It is against UTM's policy to accept political*

gifts or assistance for the purpose of canvassing for votes. The student was subjected to disciplinary action that prohibited him from being appointed in the student council. He clearly violated our rules. We justified the action taken against him upon consideration of his influence on students, hoping it will serve as a lesson for all.

The same informant extended his comment on political influence on campus:

Student political participation does not mean that students have the fully capacity or freedom to do whatever they wish. They should consider that the university refuses any external political influence. We do not want the public to view us in contempt, turning a university as a political arena. That would bring bigger issues in future.

Embedded Values in Student Political Participation

Based on the responses, there was a strong sense amongst the informants that they were motivated to actively engage in politics. Three (3) core values emerged from their views: Integrity, social responsibility, and professionalism.

Integrity, a universally recognised value, is characterised as "wholeness" or completeness, consistency, and coherence of principles and values. It is the quality of acting in harmony with relevant moral values, norms, and rules, a choice based partly on some of the arguments already put forward (Huberts, 2018). Integrity in the context of student political participation revolves around instilling trust in the leadership. Informant USIM 1 insisted that:

I place integrity as the highest value. An integrous individual is someone who has reached the highest virtue of humanity. When it comes to the political scene, he is someone who can be entrusted to lead his followers or supporters.

Integrity was also viewed as adherence to moral and ethical principles as mentioned by informant UTHM 1:

My understanding of integrity is that it is a value that demands adherence to moral values and strong ethical principles. Integrity ingrained in the heart of students can be observed through their character, behaviour, and actions.

Informants were also motivated by a sense of social responsibility in their student political participation. This value revolves around an awareness of the broader social impacts of any given general practice. For these informants, social responsibility meant empowering and aiding others, particularly in advocating for student' voices to be heard by the higher-ups. This is reflected in the comment of informant UTHM 3:

My motivation is to help amplify students' concerns and issues to the higher management. I notice that most issues only reached the student representative level, in which no further action is taken to resolve them. I aim to inform the student affairs management on the real issues from the ground and work towards solutions to help students.

Social responsibility is commonly linked to personal accountability and refers to the attitudes of responsible citizens and organisations that consider the impact of their actions on the wider community. In this case, it dealt with disseminating true and honest information to society. This placed students as a social agent to bridge a racial gap and maintain a harmonious society as described by informant UTM 2:

We are responsible for spreading the right information to the community. The way politics used to be, there was a lot of incorrect information. Those of us who have received higher education, we must be good at interpreting and are responsible for providing the

correct information to the community. Not providing the wrong information or accusations to the community. This is because we are multiracial. Usually, sensitive issues will affect the harmony in our country. Being responsible is important for us to maintain harmony in our country, avoid sensitive issues and maintain relations between races.

Furthermore, the value of professionalism played a significant role in shaping student political participation. Professionalism encompasses the guiding beliefs and principles that influence an individual's work behavior and often extends to personal values such as maturity, tolerance, and responsibility (Poorchangizi *et al.*, 2017). In embracing professionalism, students were expected to act in accordance with their status as university students and to be mindful of the prevailing circumstances. Informant UTM 1 asserted his response:

I deem maturity as necessary. University students are no longer children. They need to be mature according to their age. Students need to know and understand current issues. They must be critical and not simply obey or expect to be spoon-fed. They need to act and find solutions, and complaining is not enough. We need someone who is a good speaker and a problem-solver.

The opinion was further extended by informant USIM 4, in which professionalism in student activism should be translated into being systematic to deliver better outcomes:

So, when something is done systematically within an association, we will get better outcomes or results. Such action will benefit everyone in a particular organisation and any group of people we are working with.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the analysis of the views of informants on student political freedom reveals several key findings. Firstly, student political freedom is perceived and interpreted within the context of Article 10 of the Federal Constitution, which enshrines the principles of freedom of expression, assembly, and association as fundamental to democracy. However, the current practices in student activism at USIM, UTM, and UTHM are tightly regulated by university rules and regulations, which do not necessarily align with the spirit of the 2018 UUCA amendment. This restricts students to engage only in activities that do not have external political influence. Moreover, student political participation is strongly influenced by universal values such as integrity, social responsibility, and professionalism. These values serve as guiding principles for students in their political engagement.

In the postmodern era, it is crucial to view student political participation not as a radical challenge to educational institutions but as an opportunity to recognise and value students as consumers, producers, evaluators, partners, and critical citizens (Garwe, 2017). Therefore, university management, particularly the student affairs department, should reconsider university policies, rules, and regulations to better align with the current needs of students and grant them the right to political freedom both on and off-campus. Furthermore, students need to broaden their interpretation of activism and politics beyond the realm of political parties and consider various forms of organisations and nation-building activities. Acknowledging the role of students as social barometers of their societies, it is time to traditionally accept student political participation as a legitimate element of the political system. This would lead to more impactful benefits for the trajectory of society. A proper and comprehensive response to student political participation by both

university management and the government is imperative to foster a healthy democratic space for all. Neglecting or repressing student political participation may lead to political apathy, ultimately posing a threat to the health of democracy.

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