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The politics of youth

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APATHY, disgust or pure disinterest? These are reasons often attributed to the lack of participation of a growing majority of Malaysia's younger generation in politics today.

There are those who turn to the Opposition or walk away in disgust over the whole matter, while others make a conscious decision not to join politics.

"We can't identify how many youths are going one way or the other," says Umno Youth acting chief Hishammuddin Tun Hussein. Conceding that the Opposition's claims of securing support of youths is something the movement does not take for granted, he remains confident that over time it will be proven that there is no alternative to the Barisan Nasional and Umno.

Determining the support for Umno Youth lies in analysing the nature of the target group. As membership is limited to Bumiputeras under 40, two significant events define the target audience: independence and the introduction of the New Economic Policy.

All of Umno Youth's current members were born after independence, and those in the newly joined ranks (or not joining) were born after the introduction of the New Economic Policy.

Party president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir explained in a recent Press conference: "Since independence, the Malays in particular feel very safe and prosperous, so much so that they take things for granted, and they do not value the struggle that was launched by Umno to protect them."

But are there effective forums and means for the youth to channel out their grievances?

A former president of the Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) Student Union who is now a partner in a legal firm in Kuala Lumpur does not think that is the case.

"Our current platforms for youth do not provide us with viable means of redress. This leaves the youth vulnerable and susceptible to propaganda and constant manipulations of the truth," he maintains.

Don Rahim, 26, a merchant banker, feels that even the political parties are not doing enough to reach out to the youth of today.

He feels most young professionals in Malaysia cannot identify with involvement in political parties where one needs to be an active participant at branch level first.

"I feel getting involved with politics at branch level is unproductive since members would be concerned with rhetoric and factioneering, not with effecting real reform."

As a result, Don is of the view that the potential of the vast pool of young professionals in the country remains largely untapped.

A former State-sponsored scholar and founder of the United Kingdom Executive Committee (UKEC), a Malaysian student organisation, says the present non-political youth organisations in Malaysia are also to blame for not effectively tackling the issues of concern to youth.

"We need more channels and forums of discussion with leaders of the government to air out our grievances."

"There seems to be little representation of our views in today's politics," says Ainun Ayub, 29, a London School of Economics-trained merchant banker.

The NEP generation's need to define their own unique way of contributing

to society has left many confused.

Absence from mainstream politics by this group has left many to conclude that they are mostly apathetic.

Among the twenty-something generation, not only in Malaysia but also in other East Asian countries, the alternative is instead emerging from an unlikely source: from outside.

New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman, in his book, *The Lexus and The Olive Tree*, describes it a "globalution", defined as "revolution from beyond".

He provides the example in Suharto-era Indonesia: "The young generation of middle-class Indonesians understood there would never be a democratic revolution from above, but they were terrified of revolution from below.

"Their whole strategy was to do everything they could to integrate Indonesia into the global institutions and markets (whether it was to Merryll Lynch, Pizza Hut or human rights NGOs) - they might be able to import from beyond the standards and rules-based systems they knew could never be generated internally."

"The trend now is for this generation to move away from mass party politics and more to communal, NGO-based activities," says Ainun.

"This is the shift of power I feel will happen, where people get together to get things done without relying too much on the politicians."

Najah Nasserri, 24, an executive with a multinational company in Kuala Lumpur, believes that the only effective forum for change in Malaysia exists in the form of the various non-governmental organisations for the respective areas of concern.

"I feel there is strong appreciation and recognition of an active role within these organisations."

Najah feels the youth of her generation are more exposed to meritocratic ideals and are thus prepared to face the challenges of the millennium without having to harp on racial and economic sentiments of the old.

But at the end of the day, where will the vote swing and in whose favour? The strength of the Malaysian youth as a political power base will soon make itself known in the upcoming general election.

* Reference: Thomas L. Friedman, *The Lexus and The Olive Tree* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux)

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