Internet, Youth And Democracy: Political Participation Of Malaysian Youth

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Scholars argue that participation in voluntary associations of a non-political nature is an important companion of political involvement, and some scholars even go further to suggest that participation in non-political voluntary organisations breeds political involvement. This article examines the nature of political involvement and participation in terms of its definition and activities. It focuses on changes in the modes of action and participation that were facilitated by internet. Young people's political participation is different i.e. they have different political attitudes with newer and different forms of participation than those practised by adults, and these [other/informal] forms are not always surveyed (Quintelier 2007: 1, 3, 6, 7). It is claimed that "young people prefer local community actions, political consumerism, new social movements and activities, single issue politics, protest politics, etc ... " (Quintelier 2007: 3). This claim is parallel with others' claim that human beings "were endowed with awesome strength and conceived 'big ideas' " and "decent politics [with an] attitude [which] is without repression toward the other" (Mara 2003: 740, 750). Thus, these youth groups provide a critique focusing on the coercions. In Malaysian context, for example, various groups with political interests are formed from time to time.

This paper also investigates the political participation of young people via the internet in the Malaysian context while exploring the progress and development of the internet over time (2008–2013) and its contribution to the Malaysian General Elections (GE) i.e. GE12 in 2008 and GE13 in 2013. The result of the GE12 has boosted the confidence of many young people and internet users to the extent that they feel able to make significant changes if they act collectively. It has created some kind of "magic bullet to activate youth political participation (Quintelier 2007: 23). Indeed, not all young Malaysians are interested in formal politics and formal organisations. There are still many young Malaysians who do not register as voters whether they have lost faith in politicians, or they are not interested in formal politics, or tired of Malaysians politicians' politicking and politicisation, or they feel politics is irrelevant in their lives or they are just ignorant of the issues (Quintelier 2007: 9, 23). The Election Commission reported about 4.9 million (in 2007) or 3.7 million (in 2009) Malaysians who do not register as voters when they become eligible by the age of 21 and 80% of them are young people aged 21-30 years old (Samsudin A. Rahim 2007: 84; Utusan Malaysia Online: 4 July 2009). These figures are observed to be in a decreasing trend over time. As it is, the Election Commission reported that 70 per cent of the 4.2 million unregistered voters are between the ages of 21 and 40 in 2013 (Channel Newsasia: 15 April 2013). The decrease in these figures of unregistered voters demonstrates that young people have become relatively more aware and responsive of elections and their political functioning roles. Hence, it is significant to investigate the changes of mood and mode in young people’s political participation.

The usage of mixed method, utilising qualitative and quantitative data to study the primary data obtain during GE12 served as the basis to compare and corroborate with data from secondary sources. These steps were taken in order to maintain the validity and reliability of the findings through triangulation. Finally, this article reveals the significance of public spheres to the citizen-oriented political activity seekers particularly youth in search of democracy through new political playgrounds in public net-spaces. It also explores the Malaysian case in relevance to other countries in examining any similarities and challenges or it is indeed an isolated case by itself that may well offer lessons to be learned in other countries in the future.(616 words).