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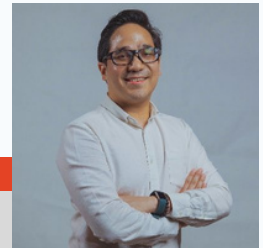
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The Role of South Africa

Playing a Constructive Role in the Emerging Multipolar World, and its' Contribution to Conflict Resolution and Peace in the Middle East

H.E. David Evan Malcolmsen, High Commissioner of South Africa to Malaysia | Lecture at the ECKL Diplomatic Encounter

It is a great pleasure and honour for me to be here today and I thank you for this opportunity to meet with you all under the auspices of the Economic Club of Kuala Lumpur, the KSI Strategic Institute for Asia Pacific and the Star newspaper.

This meeting comes just a few days before we celebrate our Freedom Day on 27 April: this year being the 30th Anniversary of Democracy in South Africa. On that historic day 30 years ago, all South Africans of voting age stood united in long, winding queues to vote in the first democratic elections ever held in the country! The majority of people were voting for the first time in their lives.

The direction of our foreign policy was set a few days later on 10 May, when President Nelson Mandela stated at his inauguration, to the world leaders present, ***"We trust that you will continue to stand by us as we tackle the challenges of building peace, prosperity, non-sexism, non-racialism and democracy"***. Further he said, ***"We pledge ourselves to liberate all our people from the continuing bondage of poverty, deprivation, suffering, gender and other discrimination"***.

Like all countries, our foreign policy is rooted in our historical experience and in our National Interest. Deriving from these, the Vision of the Department of International Relations and Cooperation of South Africa is of an African continent, which is prosperous, peaceful, democratic, non-racial, non-sexist, and united, and which contributes to a world that is just and equitable. In other words, what we want for ourselves, we want for our brothers and sisters in our continent of Africa, as well as the world at large. We want to help create a better South Africa for all, a better Africa for all, and a better world for all.

This speaks to what is sometimes called the concentric circle approach in our foreign policy. Firstly, our foreign policy is rooted in our domestic values, principles, priorities, and objectives, ultimately aimed at addressing the triple challenge of poverty, unemployment, and inequality. It derives from our Constitution, and our National Development Plan 2030. This then finds expression in our commitment to the growth and development of Southern Africa, particularly through the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and its Regional Indicative Strategic Development Programme; as well as to a stable and prosperous African continent, working within the African Union and in terms of its' development Agenda 2063 and the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD). From this then flows our commitment to solidarity and cooperation with countries and institutions of the South, where we find our intersection with Malaysia, and to cooperation with countries and institutions of the North. Lastly, it finds expression in the multilateral global arena, in our commitment to multilateralism and a just and equitable world order.

Therefore, put another way, the pillars of South Africa's foreign policy accord central importance to advancing and championing the interests of Southern Africa and the African Continent; secondly, to working with countries and institutions of the South to address shared challenges of underdevelopment; and to promote global equity and social justice; thirdly, to working with countries and institutions of the North to develop a true and effective partnership for a better world; and lastly, doing our part to strengthen the multilateral system, including its transformation, to better reflect the diversity of our nations, the current realities and to ensure its centrality in global governance.

Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The title of my presentation today references South Africa's constructive role in the emerging multipolar world. Central to this is a belief in our "Shared Destiny in a Changing World". In this regard, the COVID-19 pandemic and the recent geo-political developments in Europe and the Middle East have brought into sharper focus than ever before the urgent need to cooperate on issues of global common concern, such as food and energy security, diversified supply chains, health systems and responses, regional insecurity and instability, and climate change. More than ever, we need to collaborate to overcome common economic challenges and to reimagine the global governance institutions.

Today, our globalised world has become ever more volatile, uncertain, and complex. It is also confronted with cross-cutting and borderless challenges, including global warming, terrorism, global pandemics, resource scarcity, and cyber security threats. The global governance architecture is at a crossroads, as it struggles to manage these stateless challenges afflicting humankind, while governing relations between states, as well as those between states and non-state actors. We all need to play our role in protecting what the SDGs represent, namely a better world for all based on a recognition that there are certain global problems, that cannot be solved alone but only in the partnerships offered by the multilateral umbrella provided by the United Nations and other international organisations

Even more so today, as we are witnessing a pushback against globalisation, as well as the emerging trends of unilateralism, populism nationalism, xenophobia, and protectionism. These make it difficult to confront common global challenges in a multilateral setting. The world is experiencing a shifting balance of forces in global economic relations and changing centres of power in a geopolitical context. The interest shown last year in the BRICS Summit hosted by South Africa, particularly in relation to the expansion of BRICS and the use of national currencies in trade and investment, perfectly illustrates the changing global geopolitical dynamics.

This is as a result of numerous factors, key among these being the rise in the contributing share of developing countries to the global economic output. Innovations in technology under the 4th Industrial Revolution are having a profound impact on the world as we know it.

JUST AN ASIDE ON BRICS QUICKLY: Certain narratives attempt to post BRICS as being set up in opposition to something, or as an alternative to something. I can assure you that it was not constructed in **opposition or to counter anything**. We are not against any country or group of countries. Rather we came together as a set of countries sharing a set of principles and objectives of what we would like to see happening nationally, regionally, and globally.

We have established institutions such as the BRICS New Development Bank that provide options and choices, in this case regarding alternate financing. The NDB is not set up in opposition to the WB and IMF, but rather as a complementary organisation.

This narrative also speaks to the question of being forced to make binary choices. It is a false narrative to say that moving closer to one partner or partnership necessarily means moving away from another. Non-aligned means you can be friends with all and enemies of none. It is not about being with us or against us as it were. In this regard, NAM is as important as ever, as we need likeminded countries to stand together to defend the space in the middle where we are not forced to choose sides, where we can defend the freedom and space to choose.

Lastly regarding BRICS, the issue of **dedollarisation** was also misrepresented ahead of the Summit in Johannesburg last year. In fact, BRICS never posited an alternate currency. Rather, the discussion was about using national currencies to fund trade and investment, and to provide the financing for infrastructure projects, through such as the NDB.

Distinguished Participants

In order to deal with these common global trends, challenges, threats, and opportunities, under the concentric circle approach, as I have said, our international engagement extends beyond SADC and Africa to encompass solidarity, cooperation and partnership with countries and institutions of the South to advance a developmental agenda designed to cater for common needs and concerns. Strategic partnerships are created with these countries and institutions through bilateral, plurilateral and multilateral arrangements. It is in this context that we see the emergence of BRICS. **It is also where we find our intersection again with Malaysia – the space where we have a “Shared Destiny in a Changing World”.**

We share many similarities with Malaysia in terms of our approach to what is needed to make the global governance system more inclusive, equitable and representative. We share common needs and concerns as developing countries of the South. Further, our two countries share many similarities politically, economically, and socially and both our countries find unity in a diversity of races, religions, languages, and cultures. We have a shared commitment to pushing back the frontiers of poverty and underdevelopment in the South, as well as a commitment to promoting the rights of the Palestinian people – an important task made ever more so by what we are witnessing in Palestine and Israel today.

As like-minded, non-aligned countries, Malaysia and South Africa have common views and interests in various areas, including in organisations such as the United Nations and its agencies; the Commonwealth; the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM); the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), the G77 caucus within the United Nations, and even in ASEAN, with South Africa having been accepted as a Sectoral Dialogue Partner. South Africa and Malaysia are cooperating in all these various multilateral fora, both recognising the importance of multilateralism as the only answer to resolving issues of common global concern. This cooperation reflects our shared values and commitment to influence the global agenda so that it reflects the needs and concerns of the South and best reflects the changed realities of the global order today.

In terms of ASEAN, South Africa acceded to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) with ASEAN on 10 November 2020 and we have been accepted as a Sectoral Dialogue Partner of ASEAN. South Africa's accession to the ASEAN TAC, along with Egypt and Nigeria, is a step closer to forging a strategic partnership between ASEAN and the African Continental Free Trade Area, through the African Union. Active trade and investment between the two blocs will change and improve the lives of people in ASEAN and Africa. In this process, it is important that we both recognise each other as gateways to our respective regions.

Accordingly, we believe that it would be important that our two organisations, ASEAN, and the African Union, initiate a process of systematic exchanges, as we share a common vision on a range of global issues and domestic challenges. Democracy, human rights, sustainable development and challenging the prevailing global system and power structures, as well as the global financial architecture, are pivotal in the foreign and domestic policies of our countries.

Another important area of possible work together, including within IORA, is on the emerging Indo-Pacific Concept. The IORA Outlook on the Indo-Pacific adopted at the Council of Ministers in Dhaka in 2022 complements the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, with several synergies that provide a further basis for cooperation for mutual benefit, especially in harnessing the opportunities in the Ocean Economy. The MoU signed last year between IORA and ASEAN at the East Asia Summit in Indonesia has laid a firm basis for deepening cooperation between the two regional organizations for mutual benefit in the Indo-Pacific region, including advancing the AfCTA. As with Malaysia, we too want to see the Indo-Pacific as a region of development, peace, stability, and prosperity.

However, we caution against the Concept being used for other purposes, such as the containment of a certain power in the region. Further, we emphasise that the Concept must embrace all members of the region, including Africa.

Ladies and Gentlemen

In terms of attempting to play a constructive role in this emerging multipolar world, South Africa has deliberately sought to contribute wherever we can in our region, continent and globally. We have utilised our own experience to promote dialogue and negotiation as the only sustainable means to solve conflict. We have shared our story of negotiated settlement in an effort to assist in bringing peace for example in Northern Ireland, in Sri Lanka, and in the Middle East Peace Process, through such as the Spier Initiative. We have contributed to UN and African peacekeeping Missions and in efforts to Silence the Guns in Africa. In this regard, we have played an active and leading role in the SADC Organ, the AU PSC, and have twice in recent years served on the UN Security Council.

In an effort to promote sustainable development and a better life for all, we have hosted such important gatherings as the WSSD, the WCAR, and the COP17 climate change talks. We have played an instrumental and leading role in the development of SADC and the AU, including initiatives such as NEPAD, Agenda 2063, and the African Peer Review Mechanism. We played an active role in the development of first the MDGs and then the SDGs, as well as in the WTO Doha Development Round. We have promoted the restructuring of the global political, economic,

and financial architecture to be more balanced, representative, and equitable to secure a global governance system that better reflects and represents today's realities.

Most recently, as you all well know by now, we decided to pursue a case against Israel at the International Court of Justice to prevent the further slaughter of Palestinians in Gaza.

On this issue, let me start by **outlining South Africa's position on Palestine**, as well as on the tragic situation in Gaza. The bonds between Palestine and the forces of liberation in South Africa were forged during our struggle for freedom. That is why in December 1997, our President at the time, **Nelson Mandela** famously said *"We know too well that our freedom is incomplete without the freedom of the Palestinians."* Therefore, we regard the issue of Palestine as a human rights issue, an issue of self-determination, not an issue of religion. It is a question of justice.

Since 1994, South Africa's foreign policy position on Palestine has been consistent and has displayed systematic diplomatic support at multilateral, regional and bilateral levels. To this effect, South Africa has played a role in supporting peace efforts by sharing its negotiated transitional experience, supporting capacity-building, and facilitating inter-Palestinian dialogue, including the appointment of Presidential Special Envoys, and providing support at the African Union, among other initiatives.

Like Malaysia, South Africa stands firm on the issue of the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people and consistently speaks out about human rights abuses by Israel in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. South Africa remains resolutely committed to the Palestinian cause and supports all efforts aimed at the establishment of a viable, contiguous Palestinian State, existing side-by-side in peace with Israel, within internationally recognised borders, based on those of 4 June 1967, with East Jerusalem as its capital, in line with all relevant UN resolutions, international law and internationally agreed parameters.

To this end, a viable and sustainable peace plan for the Middle East must ensure that Palestine's sovereignty, territorial integrity, and economic viability is guaranteed, with sovereign equality between Palestine and Israel. The outcome of negotiations must be a just, sustainable, and lasting peaceful solution to the conflict.

In terms of the specific crisis currently underway since 7 October 2023, South Africa has condemned the attacks on civilians by both Hamas and Israel. Further, we have condemned the use of collective punishment in Gaza and the atrocities being committed against the civilian population by Israel.

Therefore, on 29 December 2023, we filed an application to institute proceedings against Israel before the International Court of Justice regarding the implementation of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in the Gaza Strip, as well as a request for urgent provisional measures.

On 26 January 2024, the Court delivered its order on South Africa's request for provisional measures. Whilst not all provisional measures that were requested by South Africa were granted, six crucial measures were that would necessarily lead to a ceasefire if properly implemented.

These measures included that Israel must, in accordance with its obligations under the Genocide Convention and in relation to Palestinians in Gaza, 'take all measures within its power' to prevent the commission of acts prohibited in the Convention, in particular killings, causing serious physical or mental harm, the deliberate infliction of conditions of life calculated to bring about the physical destruction of the population in whole or in part, and the imposition of measures intended to prevent births. Further, that Israel must take all measures within its power to prevent and punish direct and public incitement to commit genocide.

Following on this, the South African Government made an urgent request to the ICJ on 12 February 2024 to consider whether the decision announced by Israel to extend its military operations in Rafah, which is the last refuge for surviving people in Gaza, requires that the Court uses its power to prevent further imminent breach of the rights of Palestinians in Gaza.

The ICJ subsequently declined this request for urgent measures to safeguard Palestinians being threatened by an Israeli ground assault in Gaza, believing essentially that the original Court Order was sufficient in addressing these concerns.

In a new filing to the ICJ on 6 March 2024, we requested the Court to take additional emergency measures to halt Israel's attacks on Gaza to counter famine and starvation there. On 28 March, the Court did adopt emergency measures, as it found that famine was setting in. It ordered Israel to ensure food supplies to the population in Gaza without delay.

Lastly, on 5 April the Court set out the schedule for the rest of the deliberations of the Court on the merits of the allegation of Genocide, stating that South Africa had until 28 October 2024 to make its' submission, and that Israel had until 28 July 2025 to respond. Although the Court has indicated in January that there is a plausible possibility of Genocide in this matter, the Court has not taken a decision on whether genocide has been committed or not. Nor has the Court decided whether it even has jurisdiction to hear the case as, during Israel's oral hearing in January, the argument was raised that there was no dispute between South Africa and Israel. As such, Israel requested the Court to remove the case from its list. While this was unsuccessful and, even though the Court did find that there was indeed a dispute between South Africa and Israel, it is very likely that Israel will still raise preliminary objections on the ground of the case being inadmissible, which will have to be considered by the Court before the matter can proceed to the merits phase. If preliminary objections are raised, the merits phase will be suspended whilst the preliminary objections phase is determined.

In a related, but independent development, South Africa and Malaysia joined a request by the United Nations General Assembly of 30 December 2022 that the **International Court of Justice render an advisory opinion on the *Legal Consequences arising from the Policies and Practices of Israel in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem***. South Africa argues that the prolonged Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territory, the illegal annexation of parts thereof and the construction of settlements in the Palestinian territory, in violation of the international law relating to occupation, violations of International Humanitarian Law applicable to occupation, racially discriminatory legislation and violations of International Human Rights Law, including the practising of the crime of apartheid, have resulted in the occupation itself becoming unlawful under international law.

In yet another separate but related development, the International Criminal Court (ICC) received a referral from five countries (South Africa, Bangladesh, Bolivia, Comoros, and Djibouti) to investigate whether crimes have been committed in the Palestinian territories as part of Israel's response to the October 7 Hamas terror attacks. The ICC was already investigating the situation in the Palestinian territories over possible crimes committed since June 2014 in Gaza and the West Bank. This investigation began in March 2021. The ICC is investigating alleged international crimes committed by individuals on both sides of the situation in Israel and Palestine, subject to its jurisdictional limitations (which are contested).

In our assessment of the developments to date, we believe that the provisional measures decided by the Court mark a decisive victory for the international rule of law and a significant milestone in the search for justice for the Palestinian people. It is the first time that Israel has been held to account in an international institution and that its' crimes have been documented in an international court of law. Double standards and hypocrisy have been exposed in this process. The ruling also affirms the importance of global governance institutions, including organs of the United Nations. A further implication is the reputational, political, and diplomatic impact on Israel, including in the court of public opinion.

The finding also makes it clear, as I have said, that there is a serious risk of genocide against the Palestinian people in Gaza. Third States must, therefore, also act independently and immediately to prevent genocide by Israel and to ensure that they are not themselves in violation of the Genocide Convention, including by aiding or assisting in the commission of genocide. This necessarily imposes an obligation on all States to cease funding and facilitating Israel's military actions, which are plausibly genocidal.

In conclusion, however, the current sad reality is that Israel is clearly disregarding the ICJ, despite submitting its' first report as ordered by the ICJ. Israel has ignored warnings from the USA and others against its' planned offensive in Rafah, and Prime Minister Netanyahu has repeatedly rejected calls to hold off on a Rafah ground offensive. He has also explicitly rejected the idea of the two-state solution. Diplomatic efforts to bring peace in Gaza are stalling and the overall death toll in Gaza continues to spiral ever higher, the majority being women and children. Most of the population is internally displaced and faces disease and starvation, in addition to the ongoing threat of military strikes.

Therefore, we must continue to do everything in our power individually and collectively to put pressure on Israel to stop the killing, to implement the binding decisions of the ICJ and to work towards a sustainable solution for the long-sought freedom of the Palestinian people. Hopefully, all these efforts will provide a new impetus to the search for a lasting political solution, peace, and stability in the Middle East.

In closing, we have come a long way together as countries and regions. The prospects into the future are as bright as ever if we show the same commitment and fortitude as those who went before us. We share similar positions and approaches to important global issues, such as climate change, the SDGs, and the rights of the Palestinian people. Therefore, there is much room for extending our cooperation and the opportunities present in the relationship, including in multilateral organisations such as the United Nations, NAM, the Commonwealth, IORA,

and ASEAN, as I have said.

Relations between South Africa and Malaysia, with your help, can only go from strength to strength, becoming ever closer and more diverse. As we forge a renewed strategic focus between us, let us remember the words of Prime Minister Badawi on a visit to South Africa in July 2005:

Indeed, Malaysia and South Africa have a deep and abiding relationship based on solid foundations, which can be built upon, not only for the benefit of both our countries, but also for the larger developing world. Both our countries have played important roles in the past and we can continue to do so in the future.

This is also therefore the message that I bring you, Mr President, that we in Malaysia view our relations with South Africa as pivotal and strategic.

We concur! As President Mandela said in Malaysia in March 1997 – ***“Many, many things make the common bond between us a natural one. In your company we feel we are among brothers and sisters – friends in need and friends indeed”.***

Humble Views from Across the Causeway

Singapore's Political Transition and the March Towards Democracy

Zaim Mohzani | Senior Director of External Affairs

From the vantage point of a Malaysian observer, the political landscape of our neighbour Singapore offers both a study in contrasts and a mirror to our own political experiences. Last month's announcement by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, detailing his plan to pass the leadership baton to Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong on 15th May 2024, serves as a point of reflection.

Singapore's political succession is reminiscent of a well-orchestrated corporate handover rather than the tumult typically associated with democratic transitions. Since achieving independence, the seamless transition of power within the ruling People's Action Party (PAP)—from Lee Kuan Yew to Goh Chok Tong, and then to Lee Hsien Loong—has been a hallmark of Singaporean governance. This system was starkly highlighted in April 2021 when the previously anointed successor, Heng Swee Keat, withdrew from the race, citing the heavy demands of leading in a post-pandemic era.

The PAP's uninterrupted rule over six decades is unparalleled among modern multiparty parliamentary democracies and has provided Singapore with both political stability and policy certainty. Many Singaporeans endorse this model, valuing the governance that has transformed their country into a global hub. However, this controlled transition process suggests a limited democratic engagement, which could be perceived as Singapore's significant vulnerability.

The most recent transition highlights an elite bargaining rather than a participatory democratic process. At the end of 2021, a consultative procedure led by retired minister Khaw Boon Wan involved 19 key stakeholders within the government and affiliated organisations, culminating in the selection of Lawrence Wong by a majority. This approach, while efficient and possibly suited to Singapore's unique needs, poses questions about the breadth of democratic involvement.

Particularly among younger Singaporeans, there is a burgeoning demand for greater political representation, as evidenced during the 2020 general elections. These voices are not seeking drastic changes in governance but are instead advocating for a more robust opposition to ensure a balanced democratic process.

Winston Churchill's words resonate deeply when considering Singapore's context: "No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time." While Singapore has prospered under its current political model, enhancing democratic engagement could further legitimise and strengthen its governance framework.

As Lawrence Wong steps forward to assume leadership, he faces the dual challenge of maintaining Singapore's economic dynamism and evolving its political framework to reflect a more participatory democratic ethos. Observing from Malaysia, it becomes apparent that while

our political paths diverge, the underlying currents of people's aspirations for more inclusive governance are strikingly similar. The unfolding political narrative in Singapore may well set a precedent for both nations, underscoring the universal quest for a balance between stability and democratic vibrancy.

Understanding the Rukun Negara

Prof. Emeritus Datuk Dr. Shad Saleem Faruqi | Sejahtera Malaysia Forum, 29 April 2024

Malaysia's Rukun Negara is nearly 54 years old. This blueprint for national unity was drafted in 1970 after the convulsions of race riots on 13 May 1969. A National Consultative Council (NCC) of 67 distinguished persons was assembled under the chairmanship of Tun Abdul Razak Hussein, then Deputy Prime Minister and chairman of the National Operations Council.

MEMBERSHIP OF THE NCC

Some of the towering personalities on the NCC were Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman, Tun Tan Siew Sin, Tun V.T. Sambanathan, Tun Ghazali Shafie, Datuk Harun Idris, Datuk Haji Mohamed Asri, Tun Datu Mustapha Harun, Tun Hussein Onn, Dr Syed Hussein Alatas, Prof Ungku Abdul Aziz, Tan Sri Syed Jaafar Albar, Tengku Ahmad Rithauddeen, Tun Dr Lim Chong Eu, Tan Sri Dr Aishah Ghani, Tan Sri Lim Phaik Gan, Datuk Seri S.P. Seenivasagam, Tun Sakaran Dandai, Tan Sri Ong Kee Hui, Datuk Stephen Kalong Ningkan, Bishop Gregory Yong and Rev Datuk Denis Dutton.

The NCC drew from all races, religions and regions. The ruling Alliance and opposition parties (except one), federal and state governments, including Sabah and Sarawak, and civil society groups and minorities actively participated. Regrettably, women were represented by only two members.

THE RUKUN NEGARA

FIVE OBJECTIVES

The NCC chiselled out five stirring objectives of our nation. These were:

- Unity
- A democratic way of life
- A just society where the prosperity of the country can be enjoyed together in a fair and equitable manner
- A liberal approach towards our rich and varied cultural traditions; and
- A progressive society that will make use of science and modern technology.

FIVE IDEALS

Supporting the five objectives were five transcendental ideals:

1. Belief in God
2. Loyalty to the King and country
3. Supremacy of the Constitution
4. Rule of law; and
5. Courtesy and morality.

Regrettably, the five objectives are rarely talked about and public authorities and school books give attention only to the five ideals.

LAUNCH OF THE RUKUN NEGARA

The Rukun Negara was launched by the then Yang di-Pertuan Agong on 31 August 1970. Like the Pancasila of Indonesia the Rukun Negara was meant to be the chart and compass and sail and anchor of the country. Unfortunately, it could not be presented to Parliament because the Emergency Proclamation of 15 May 1969 had suspended Parliament. A major difference with Indonesia is that the Rukun Negara was not drafted at the time of independence but 13 years later to guide a nation traumatised by the tragedy of 1969.

NON-INCORPORATION IN THE CONSTITUTION

Ideally, the Rukun Negara should have been incorporated into the Federal Constitution as a Preamble. But because Parliament was not in session in 1970, and amendments to the Constitution require special parliamentary legislation, the Rukun Negara began its journey as an extra-legal ideological statement. It has never been converted to law and is not backed by any criminal sanctions. Perhaps it is time to do that now given our regression in race and religious relations.

NGO PROPOSAL TO ADOPT THE RUKUN NEGARA AS OUR CONSTITUTION'S PREAMBLE

The Rukun Negara was drafted in 1970. Despite its brilliance and transcendental content and despite the passage of 54 years since its inception, it has not become the guiding light it was meant to be.

It is with this backdrop that in mid-2016, a group of individuals led by Dr Chandra Muzaffar of JUST International, brought together a group of community representatives to draft a Preamble for our Constitution based on the Rukun Negara and to propose its adoption by the government and Parliament.

I was given the task of capturing the high aspirations of the group and adopting and adapting our existing and venerated national ideology – the Rukun Negara – as the template for our Preamble. We prepared a Report and wrote to all Ministers and MPs. Sadly our Report and proposal received very few replies.

We were of the opinion that incorporating the venerated provisions of the Rukun Negara into the opening passage of our document of destiny (our Constitution) will strengthen both documents for the following reasons.

SHARED IDEALS BETWEEN THE RUKUN NEGARA AND THE CONSTITUTION

The Objectives and Principles of the Rukun Negara are substantially in line with the provisions of our supreme Constitution. In fact, the Rukun Negara distils the essence of our Constitution. It provides a guide to our legislature, judiciary and executive.

- The Rukun Negara's "supremacy of the Constitution" is provided for in Article 4(1) and 162(6) of the Constitution.
- "Belief in God" is honoured in Articles 3 and 11.
- "Loyalty to King and country" are required by innumerable provisions including Articles 32–38.
- "Rule of law" is implied in provisions for judicial review of governmental action in Articles 4, 121 and 128.
- "Morality" is safeguarded by empowering Parliament in Articles 10 and 11 to enact laws to safeguard morality.
- "Democratic way of life" is promoted by innumerable provisions conferring personal liberties^[1] and providing for elected and representative assemblies.^[2]
- "Rich and varied cultural traditions" are protected by provisions for freedom of religion,^[3] right to native languages and traditions,^[4] customary rights,^[5]
- Freedom of speech, assembly and association,^[6] and the special rights of Sabah and Sarawak in our federal set-up.^[7]

CONSTITUTIONAL BASIS FOR NATIONAL UNITY

Like the Rukun Negara, our Federal Constitution supplies the foundation for moderation, tolerance, harmony and national unity. Even in its "ethnic clauses" the Constitution reflects a remarkable spirit of compromise, compassion and moderation.

INDIGENOUS FEATURES

In recognition of the fact that Malaya was historically the land of the Malays, the Merdeka Constitution incorporated a number of features indigenous to the Malay archipelago, among them:

Sultanate: The Malay Sultanate was preserved (Article 71). But was converted from an absolutist monarchy to a constitutional one.

Islam: As Islam was the defining feature of the majority Malays, Islam was adopted as the religion of the Federation but with freedom to other communities to practise their faiths in peace and harmony (Article 3).

[1] Articles 5 to 13.

[2] Articles 44–49, 71–72, 113–119.

[3] Article 11

[4] Article 152

[5] Article 150(6A),

[6] Article 10

[7] Articles 95B–95E, 112A–112E, 161–161H, Schedule 9–10.

Syariah laws: The Constitution provides for the existence of Syariah laws and Syariah courts to deal with matters of Islam. However the application of Syariah laws was subject to a number of restrictions. First, though Islam is the religion of the Federation, the country was given a supreme Constitution. Second, the Syariah applies in only in 25 or so areas enumerated in the Constitution's Ninth Schedule, List II, Para 1. Third, Syariah courts have no jurisdiction over non-Muslims.

Malay special position: The historical tradition of a "special position" for the Malays and (in 1963) the natives of Sabah and Sarawak was continued in Article 153.

Malay reserves: Malay reservation lands were recognized (Article 89).

BM: Bahasa Melayu was entrenched as the official language for all official purposes but with freedom for other communities to preserve their languages and to use them for non-official purposes (Article 152).

Customary laws: There is special protection for the customary laws of the Malays and (since 1963) native law in Sabah and Sarawak.

Rural weightage during elections: There is weightage for rural areas (which are predominantly Malay) in the drawing up of electoral boundaries (Twelfth Schedule).

Official posts: At the federal level, except for the post of the Yang di-Pertuan Agong, non-Malays were eligible to hold any administrative, judicial or legislative post in the government. But the historical reservation of some top posts in the State Executive for Malays was continued unless the Sultan allowed otherwise.

PROTECTION FOR NON-MALAYS

The Malay-Muslim features in the Constitution are balanced by other provisions suitable for a multi-racial and multi-religious society. The Constitution is replete with safeguards for the interest of other communities, though the actual practice shows a wide disparity between theory and reality.

Citizenship: Citizenship rights were granted to all persons on a non-ethnic and non-religious basis (Articles 14-19). The concept of citizenship by birth in the country) was part of the Constitution in 1957 and was used to grant citizenship to 1.6 million non-Malays at the time of Merdeka.

Electoral process: The electoral process permits all communities an equal right to vote and to seek elective office at federal and state levels. Race and religion are irrelevant for eligibility to vote and contest. (Article 119).

Fundamental rights: The chapter on fundamental liberties grants human rights to all citizens irrespective of race or religion (Articles 5-13). Subject to a few exceptions fundamental rights are available to all persons equally.

Federal posts: At the federal level, membership of the judiciary, the Cabinet of Ministers, Parliament, the federal public services and the special Commissions under the Constitution are open to all irrespective of race, religion or gender.

Education: Education is free at the primary and secondary levels and is open to all irrespective of race or religion. However, university education is subject to strict quotas (Article 153(8A)). To open up educational opportunities for nonMalays, private schools, colleges and universities are allowed. Foreign education is available to whoever wishes to seek it.

Financial assistance for education: Malays as well as non-Malays are eligible for government education scholarships and loans.

Protection during an emergency: Even during a state of emergency under Article 150, some rights like citizenship, religion and language are protected by Article 150(6A) against easy repeal.

Sabah & Sarawak's special rights: The spirit of give and take between the races, regions and religions is especially applicable to Sabah and Sarawak. These states enjoy special legislative, executive, judicial and financial powers: Schedule 9.

Article 3(4): Though Islam is the religion of the Federation, Malaysia is not a theocratic state. The Constitution is supreme. The Syariah does not override the Constitution (Article 3(4) and the case of Che Omar Che Soh (1988).

Religious freedom: The Syariah does not apply to non-Muslims. All religious communities are allowed to profess and practise their faiths in peace and harmony. State support by way of funds and grants of land is often given to other religions. Missionaries and foreign priests are allowed entry into the country. Every religious group has the right to establish and maintain religious institutions for the education of its children.

Vernacular languages: Though Bahasa Melayu is the national language for all official purposes there is protection for the formal study in all schools of other languages if 15 or more pupils so desire. There is statutory protection for the existence of vernacular schools and legal permission to use other languages for non-official purposes.

Malay reserves: Though Article 89 reserves some lands for Malays, it is also provided that (i) no non-Malay land shall be appropriated for Malay reserves and (ii) that if any land is reserved for Malay reservations, an equivalent amount of land shall be opened up for non-Malays.

Article 153: Article 153 on the special position of Malays is hedged in by limitations. (i) Along with his duty to protect the Malays and the natives of Sabah and Sarawak, the King is also enjoined to safeguard the legitimate interests of other communities. (ii) The special position of the Malays applies only in four prescribed sectors and services. (iii) In the operation of Article 153, no non-Malay or his heir should be deprived of what he already has. (iv) No business or profession can be exclusively assigned to any race. No ethnic monopoly is permitted. (v) Article 153 does not override Article 136. Quotas and reservations are permitted at entry point but once a person is in the public service he should be treated equally.

Unity does not mean uniformity: The various communities were allowed to maintain their distinct ethnic identities, cultures, religions, languages, lifestyles, dresses, foods, music, vernacular schools, etc. Culturally the country is a rich cultural mosaic. Secularism and religion live side by side. Mosques and temples and churches dot the landscape. Despite the prohibitions for Muslims, non-Muslims are not forbidden to take alcohol, have gambling permits, rear pigs, and dress in their own or the ways of the West. Political parties, businesses and cultural associations are allowed to be organized on ethnic or religious lines so much so that Malaya (later Malaysia) began its tryst with destiny looking a little bit like a rainbow with colours that are separate but not apart. Some success has indeed been achieved to discover that which unites us and to tolerate that which divides us. Sometime ago we scored fairly well on the World Peace Index, being ranked 19 out of 153 states evaluated.

USING THE ECONOMY TO UNITE THE PEOPLE

In the commercial and economic area, there is the right to property, freedom of trade and commerce, a relatively open, globalised economy, encouragement to the non-Malay dominated private sector to invest in the economy, freedom to import and export, and to transfer funds to and from abroad. In general, economic opportunities have given everyone a stake in the country. The non-Malay contribution to the building of the economic infrastructure of the country has given the country prosperity as well as stability.

DARK CLOUDS OVER THE HORIZON

Sadly, we have suffered a regression. Since the nineties racial and religious polarization has reached alarming levels. Ethnic and religious ideology and racial politics are causing a hardening of cultural boundaries. We have become a "nation of strangers". In many corners of the world walls of separation are being dismantled. Sadly, in our society these walls are being fortified. The task of restoring the spirit of tolerance and accommodation is an arduous one. We all have a role to play. As a beginning, let us improve constitutional literacy. And incorporate both parts of the Rukun Negara as a Preamble to our supreme Constitution.

Rethink or Sink

Our Shaky Education System

Luqman Al-Hakim | Research & Communications Executive

The Malaysian collective consciousness has always been remarkably adept at identifying systemic problems, particularly in the realm of education. This acute awareness, however, starkly contrasts with the prevalent disarray in consensus building towards viable solutions. It appears that the discourse around educational reform in Malaysia often highlights numerous challenges without converging on a unified approach to remediation.

Diagnosis of the Current Educational Landscape

Malaysia's educational system, like many globally, faces challenges. These challenges have been articulated through various discussions and analyses, reflecting concerns about the sustainability and efficacy of current educational policies.

1. Access and Inclusivity: Despite progress, disparities in access to quality education remain, particularly affecting rural and underserved communities.
2. Quality of Education: There is a perceived decline in educational standards and outcomes, partly attributed to outdated curricula, under-resourced facilities, and inadequate teacher training.
3. Alignment with Labor Market: Graduates often find themselves ill-prepared for the demands of the contemporary job market, indicating a misalignment between educational outputs and economic needs.
4. Research and Innovation: While Malaysia aspires to become a hub for innovation, limited investment in research and development within academic institutions hampers this ambition.

Given these issues, the argument unfolds that piecemeal reforms or isolated policy adjustments may no longer suffice. Instead, a radical rethinking of the entire educational framework and pipeline is imperative – a complete overhaul aimed at reinventing the foundations and objectives of the educational system in Malaysia.

Strategic Areas for Educational Investment

Aligning with the notion that education is a fundamental investment in a nation's future, several strategic focus areas emerge. These are not merely reformative steps but foundational changes intended to revolutionize the educational landscape;

- Universal Access to Education: Guaranteeing that every citizen has access to education without financial, geographical, or socio-economic barriers. This would require significant investment in infrastructure, particularly in underserved areas, and a commitment to leveraging technology for education delivery.

- **Quality Enhancement:** Elevating the standards of education by modernizing curricula, incorporating contemporary learning tools and technologies, and enhancing the training and development of educators. This also includes a shift towards critical thinking, problem-solving, and adaptive learning techniques that are more congruent with global educational standards.
- **Labor Market Alignment:** Ensuring that educational programs are closely aligned with current and future job market demands. This involves continuous collaboration between educational institutions, industry leaders, and government bodies to dynamically adjust curricula and training programs that meet economic needs.
- **Incentive for Research and Innovation:** Cultivating a robust culture of research and innovation within educational institutions by providing the necessary funding, resources, and incentives. This also involves fostering partnerships with global research networks and industries to ensure that research outcomes are both relevant and impactful.

These strategic areas are envisioned not as mere enhancements to the existing system but as cornerstones of a new, holistic educational framework. This approach is aimed at transforming Malaysian education into a model that not only addresses its current deficiencies but also positions it as a leader in global education reform.

On Privatization

I truly regret the ever-growing suggestion for the push for privatization in education, as it often adversely affects educational quality and equity. The argument against the increasing privatization of education is supported by a multitude of studies and reports that highlight significant concerns.

The privatization of education, particularly in developing regions, has often led to disparities in educational access and quality. For instance, while privatization can spur the growth of educational institutions in response to market demands, it also tends to create barriers for economically disadvantaged students. These barriers manifest through high tuition fees and other costs that many families cannot afford, which ultimately limits access to quality education for all. This was evident in the case of India, where the rapid expansion of private teacher education institutions resulted in significant financial burdens on students due to high capitation fees, without necessarily improving the quality of education or teacher preparedness.

Furthermore, analyses have shown that while privatization might increase efficiency in some sectors, its application in education has not always led to improved outcomes. A comprehensive review revealed that the benefits of privatization in education are not empirically proven across different contexts, suggesting that its effectiveness is highly variable and often not the best policy approach for enhancing educational quality or accessibility.

The drive towards privatization also overlooks the crucial role that public investment in education plays in achieving broad social and economic goals. For example, countries that maintain strong public education systems, like Finland, demonstrate high educational outcomes and equality. This contrasts sharply with scenarios where education is heavily privatized, leading to increased inequality and segmentation within the education system.

These findings suggest that instead of moving toward greater privatization, there should be a renewed focus on strengthening public education systems through comprehensive reforms that ensure universal access to quality education, alignment with labor market needs, and robust support for research and innovation. These strategic areas are crucial for fostering an education system that is inclusive, equitable, and capable of meeting the challenges of the modern world.

The Economic Rationale

The economic rationale for substantial public investment in education is robust, as evidenced by extensive research highlighting the multiple benefits of such investment. Public investments in education not only enhance the quality of human capital but also yield significant economic returns through improved labor productivity and higher earnings. An additional year of schooling has been shown to raise individual earnings by approximately 10%, underscoring education as a highly beneficial investment.

Economic models further support the idea that investing in education stimulates economic growth. Studies attribute a substantial portion of economic growth to improvements in the level of education. For instance, historical analysis in the United States has indicated that increases in educational attainment were responsible for a significant portion of economic output growth throughout the 20th century. Plus, public investments in education can lead to equitable economic growth, create jobs, and generate tax revenues that cover the costs of the investments themselves, making them self-sustaining.

Bahasa Ibunda

Studies demonstrate that students achieve better academic outcomes when taught in their first language, a principle affirmed by numerous educational researches and organizations.

For instance, UNESCO highlights the significant advantages of mother tongue education, noting that students are more likely to enroll and succeed in school, less likely to drop out, and more likely to engage actively when taught in a language they fully understand. This is because learning in one's mother tongue can simplify the acquisition of new knowledge, allowing students to focus on the subject matter rather than grappling with a foreign language.

Further research by the Global Partnership for Education reinforces these findings, indicating that mother tongue instruction in early education supports critical thinking and accelerates learning, as it eliminates the dual hurdles of language and conceptual understanding. Walter & Benson provide empirical support for this, showing that students who received education in their native language performed significantly better across all subjects, including math and sciences.

Economically, the benefits of mother tongue education extend beyond individual success in academic environments. A report by the World Bank suggests that facilitating education through the mother tongue not only improves the quality of education but also contributes to broader

economic development by equipping students with the skills necessary to excel in the workforce.

Thus, the evidence strongly advocates for the incorporation of mother tongue instruction in STEM subjects as a means to enhance educational outcomes. This approach does not merely align with best educational practices; it also fosters a more competent and capable workforce, thereby supporting larger social and economic objectives. Implementing policies that promote mother tongue education can significantly improve students' understanding and mastery of complex concepts, enhancing both their academic performance and their future professional opportunities.

Conclusion

In addressing the myriad challenges and strategic opportunities within Malaysia's education system, it becomes clear that a multifaceted approach is necessary to foster substantial improvement and align with global best practices. The discourse around Malaysian education underscores a keen societal capacity to identify systemic issues, yet reveals a fragmentation in how to address them. The consensus suggests a pressing need not merely for reform but for a profound transformation of the educational framework to better serve the nation's socio-economic objectives.

Key points include the critical examination of the privatization trend in education, which, while expanding access to educational institutions, often does so at the expense of educational equity and quality, particularly for economically disadvantaged students. The adverse effects of privatization, such as increased educational costs without commensurate improvements in quality, argue for a reinforced commitment to public education systems.

Moreover, substantial investment in public education is validated by robust economic evidence suggesting that such funding is not only a social good but a potent economic stimulus. Research indicates that each additional year of schooling can significantly boost individual earnings and, by extension, national economic growth. This investment in human capital is crucial for developing a skilled, innovative workforce capable of driving future technological and economic advancements.

The choice of language in education also holds profound implications for learning efficacy, particularly in STEM education. Studies advocate for instruction in the mother tongue to enhance understanding, engagement, and retention of complex subjects, thus improving overall academic outcomes and better preparing students for professional success.

In conclusion, Malaysia's path forward involves a strategic overhaul of its education system to emphasize public investment, equity, quality enhancement, and alignment with labor market needs. By adopting policies that promote education in the mother tongue and resist the drawbacks of privatization, Malaysia can cultivate an education system that not only meets the diverse needs of its population but also positions the country as a leader in global education reform. This holistic approach promises not only to rectify current deficiencies but to lay down the foundations for a resilient, inclusive, and progressive educational future.

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On Youth Politics with Mr Shaik Irfan

Mr Shaik Irfan is currently a Program Associate at Initiate.My

Could you start by introducing yourself and sharing a bit about your journey? What motivates your interest in youth politics?

My name is Shaik Irfan, and I'm currently an undergraduate studying Governance and Public Policy. Right now, I'm taking up the role of a Programme Associate at INITIATE.MY, where I'm directly involved in preventing and countering violent extremism while also advocating for freedom of religious belief. It might sound surprising, but my interest in politics really sparked during the COVID-19 pandemic. Back in 2020, I was one of the students taking my SPM exams, that year was often referred to as the 'pro-max' batch. Government policies like the MCO directly affected me, as they did everyone else in the country. This period became a turning point, raising my awareness of political issues as I, along with many other students, felt the real-world consequences of government decisions. The experience ignited a passion in me to learn more, and I started consuming more information about current affairs. I even ventured into the political side of social media, particularly Twitter, where I actively participated in discussions about policy. However, as I engaged with others online, I started noticing a gap in awareness – many of my peers simply weren't interested or informed about these important topics. This realization solidified my belief that young people have a crucial role to play. We are the future, and our voices matter in shaping policy and driving positive change. Hence, I began spreading awareness and promoting political literacy among my peers, as I believe that an informed and engaged youth is essential for a healthy and thriving democracy.

From your perspective, what are the primary reasons behind the growing leftist sentiments among young people today? How do these sentiments manifest within the youth leadership or political activities you're involved with?

In my experience, young people today are becoming increasingly drawn to leftist ideals for a few key reasons. Firstly, with constant global connectivity, we're bombarded with information about the world's issues and conflicts. This exposure makes us less likely to accept the status quo or shy away from challenging traditional, conservative norms. We're also not afraid to tackle taboo topics. Secondly, a lot of the problems facing our generation, like climate change and the crippling cost of housing, seem directly linked to the current capitalist system. It's hard to ignore that connection.

These sentiments definitely translate into the activities and goals of the youth organization I engaged with. Our focus is very much on promoting sustainability, inclusivity, and embracing diversity. We believe these elements are crucial for building a better future. We see a clear link between these goals and leftist principles, and we're not afraid to advocate for them.

How do socio-economic factors contribute to the leftist leanings among youth? Can you discuss specific events or trends that have significantly influenced this political orientation?

Socioeconomic background undoubtedly plays a significant role in shaping a person's political leanings. Take my own journey, for example. Growing up in a more urban and Malay-centric community, I was exposed to a certain set of social norms and stereotypes, particularly around race and wealth. Moving to a suburban middle school was a turning point. Suddenly, I found myself surrounded by friends from diverse backgrounds. This experience shattered the preconceived notions I had held. I saw firsthand that stereotypes like "all Chinese are rich" simply weren't true. Instead, I witnessed the struggles faced by many of my classmates, especially those from lower-income families, regardless of race. The lack of access to quality education and opportunities for those without the resources for private universities became painfully obvious when some friends didn't even qualify for public institutions, despite scoring straight A's. Witnessing these inequalities sparked a class consciousness within me, leading me to explore leftist ideologies that placed a strong emphasis on social justice and equal opportunity. This personal experience highlights how socioeconomic factors, particularly issues of access and disparity, can significantly influence young people towards leftist political perspectives.

What role do you believe think tanks and youth leadership networks play in nurturing and guiding the political sentiments and activism of young people, especially regarding leftist ideologies?

In my view, think tanks and youth leadership networks are essential for nurturing and guiding the political activism and ideologies of young people, particularly those leaning left. These organizations play a crucial role in youth capacity building. Think tanks take the lead in researching and publishing policy briefs on issues that resonate deeply with young people, like social and economic justice, systemic reforms, and environmental sustainability. This research provides a strong foundation of knowledge for young people interested in these areas. But it doesn't stop there. Think tanks and youth networks also function as platforms for young people to gain in-depth knowledge through workshops, forums, and roundtables. These events not only educate but also foster discussion and debate, allowing young voices to be heard on specific issues.

Youth leadership networks take it a step further by creating a supportive environment for passionate young people. They connect young activists with like-minded individuals, fostering collaboration through resource-sharing and mentorship programs. This nurturing space allows young people to learn from experienced activists and strategize ways to effectively channel their energy and idealism into meaningful action. By providing these resources and guidance, think tanks and youth leadership networks empower young people to become informed and engaged participants in shaping a more just and equitable future.

What are the most significant challenges and criticisms faced by young people with leftist leanings in their pursuit of political engagement and activism? How do you address these challenges within your role?

One of the biggest hurdles is the stereotype that we're naive idealists with no real-world experience. This dismissal undermines our voices and capabilities. Another common criticism is that our rejection of traditional values paints us as morally corrupt, making some folks unwilling to engage with us or take our causes seriously.

So, how do I address these challenges in my role? Firstly, I believe in the power of knowledge. Within my work, I emphasize the importance of an in-depth understanding of the issues we tackle. Whether it's through research or workshops, I strive to equip young people with the knowledge and data they need to back up their arguments. A well-informed voice is a powerful voice.

Secondly, building resilience is key. Criticism, even from within leftist circles with their emphasis on political correctness, is inevitable. I encourage open and respectful dialogue within our organization but also emphasize the importance of developing a thick skin. Being passionate doesn't mean being thin-skinned.

Ultimately, the best way to counter these criticisms is by demonstrating our knowledge, commitment, and effectiveness. When we engage in thoughtful discussions, propose well-researched solutions, and achieve positive change, we slowly dismantle these stereotypes. That's the power of action.

Looking forward, what do you believe are the future prospects for leftist sentiments among youth? How might these political leanings influence policy-making and societal changes in the coming years?

Looking ahead, I see leftist sentiments among young people continuing to gain traction, but with some nuances. While it's likely these ideologies will have a strong foothold within the youth demographic, their influence on the broader population might be slower to take root.

We were able to witness this in the recent 15th General Election's "Green Wave" phenomenon, driven by young first-time voters. Increased youth participation in national politics is undoubtedly a positive step for a healthy democracy. However, a significant challenge remains – young people's susceptibility to populist rhetoric, particularly from right-wing politicians.

We saw this play out recently during GE15. Echoes of racial and anti-minority rhetoric, reminiscent of the 13th May incident, resurfaced among some youth on social media platforms like TikTok. This highlights the risk of populist narratives potentially hindering progressive policy agendas. If young people are swayed by divisive rhetoric, it could translate to less support for progressive bills, leading to policies that don't fully align with their core values.

Therefore, it's crucial to bridge this gap by promoting critical thinking and media literacy among young people. We need to empower them to analyze information independently and discern genuine solutions from populist sound bites. Only then can their growing political voice truly translate into positive societal changes that champion social justice, environmental sustainability, and inclusivity.

Can you share successful strategies for engaging and mobilizing young people with leftist sentiments? How do these strategies foster constructive political dialogue and action?

As I mentioned before, it is important to cultivate a healthy environment for youth with the passion to bring changes. Young people need a platform to explore their ideas and concerns without judgment. This can be achieved through public workshops, forums, and online communities hosted by youth networks, student associations, or even NGOs. These spaces equip young people with the resources and skills they need to thrive, such as critical thinking and political literacy.

Youth networks and think tanks also play a vital role in nurturing leadership potential. Mentorship programs, leadership training sessions, and fellowship opportunities equip young people with the tools and confidence to become effective advocates. Think tanks, for example, can offer fellowships that provide hands-on experience in policy analysis, honing young people's technical skills while allowing them to contribute to meaningful research projects.

By focusing on these strategies, we can empower young people with the knowledge, skills, and confidence to not just be passionate, but to be strategic and impactful in their activism. This will foster constructive dialogue as these well-informed young people are better equipped to engage in respectful discussions, challenge the status quo with well-researched arguments, and propose practical solutions.

Finally, what advice would you give to young individuals who are beginning to explore their political beliefs and are interested in leftist ideologies? How can they effectively contribute to the political discourse and action in their communities?

For young individuals just starting to explore their political beliefs, particularly with an interest in leftist ideologies, my advice is this: embrace curiosity! Don't shy away from asking questions, even the tough ones. Approach taboo topics with an open mind, and delve into different political ideologies. This is a journey of self-discovery that will solidify your principles and shape your worldview.

The world is vast and diverse. Don't confine yourself to one echo chamber. Actively seek out people from different backgrounds and experiences. Join organizations that align with your values. This exposure will broaden your perspective and equip you with a richer understanding of the world's complexities.

Remember, change rarely happens overnight. It's a gradual process that starts with small steps. Begin by focusing on your local community, whether it's your neighbourhood or campus. Identify an issue that resonates with you and engage with others to find solutions. Serving your local community is a stepping stone to serving your nation.

Let Politics Be a Battle of Ideas and Ideals

Zaim Mohzani | Senior Director of External Affairs

In the quiet corner of my study, a book caught my eye—a relic from my undergraduate days titled “Political Ideologies: An Introduction” by Andrew Heywood. As I dusted off its cover, a wave of nostalgia swept over me. The book, which I had once pored over studiously, offered a comprehensive tour through the vibrant landscape of political thought—from liberalism and conservatism to socialism and beyond.

Today, the essence of these ideologies seems lost in the cacophony of the Kuala Kubu Bharu by-election, which is currently dominating Malaysia's news cycle. The contest pits the ruling coalition, Pakatan Harapan (PH), and Barisan Nasional (BN) against the opposition, Perikatan Nasional (PN). Yet, the discourse at political rallies has degenerated into a spectacle of insults and polemics, a far cry from the substantive debates one might hope for in a democratic society.

It is often stated that politics ought to be a battleground of policies, not personalities—and rightly so. Policies, after all, are manifestations of underlying ideologies. Even politicians who champion pragmatism are guided by some ideological compass. For instance, in a revealing episode of the podcast *Keluar Sekejap*, Home Minister Saifuddin Nasution, who claims political flexibility, displayed conservative tendencies starkly contrasting with his party and PH peers. In the same podcast, Anthony Loke of the Democratic Action Party (DAP) discussed his party's ideological shift from democratic socialism to social democracy, signifying a pivot towards centrism from its more radical origins.

Ideology should not be seen as a pejorative but as a lens through which political motives and actions can be discerned. UMNO, for example, bases its appeal on Malay nationalism—emphasising race, religion, and nation—which has historically shaped policies like the New Economic Policy (NEP). Conversely, DAP has advocated for a vision of a “Malaysian Malaysia”—a more egalitarian Malaysian society, although its stance has moderated over time.

The so-called “Green Wave” led by PAS under the Perikatan Nasional banner is a form of political Islam aimed at fostering an Islamic ethos in governance, stopping short of establishing an Islamic state. This approach to Islamism is not inherently problematic and is echoed by PAS's rival, Parti Amanah Negara, which offers a progressive interpretation of Islamism, encapsulated in the concept of “Rahmatan Lil Alamin”—mercy for all.

Government policies often mirror the ideological positions of their proponents. Progressive initiatives like the Progressive Wage Model and Inisiatif Pendapatan Rakyat (IPR) contrast with market-centric strategies such as the New Industrial Master Plan 2030 and the KL20 Action Plan. Although the government's track record is mixed, the Opposition has notably struggled to articulate how its conservative Malay-Muslim ideology translates into viable policy propositions that would demonstrate its readiness to be the government-in-waiting.

As I returned the book to its shelf, it struck me that political engagement need not be trivial or personality-driven. It should be a robust exchange of ideas and ideals. My own political beliefs—a hybrid of liberalism, conservatism, and socialism—suggest that many of us embody a spectrum of ideologies. It's essential, then, that we as citizens engage earnestly with our ideological leanings. Let us advocate for a political arena where ideas triumph over insults, and ideologies provide the framework for meaningful policy discourse.

The Unseen Discrimination Against the Disabled

Elisha Patmon | Youth Lead KSI

According to the Centre for Disease Control, a disability is defined as “any condition of the body or mind (impairment) that makes it more difficult for the person with the condition to do certain activities (activity limitation) and interact with the world around them (participation restrictions).” This definition tends to make amendments when necessary and have tweaks and turns, but the principle is the same – it is knowing that a person cannot function to the best of their ability, without some help to interact in the way that we can, with the rest of the world.

In tandem with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2010, Malaysian disabled activists have proposed amending the 2008 Persons with Disabilities Act (PwD), as it lacks elements that are well behind our neighboring ASEAN countries. There is little to no harmonization of other domestic legislation – what this means is that there are no specifics as to how these laws implemented in the PwD are spread across sectors to protect and help the rights of disabled people. A comprehensive understanding of the multi-prong assessment of different avenues encompassing disability rights is lacking. With that an acute intersectionality that includes gender, age, and class, when it comes to engaging with disability law is not there.

Local disability NGOs like Boleh Space and the Deaf Advocacy and Well-Being National Organisation (Dawn) point out inconsistencies with how the laws are written and how there are no specificities that outline pertinent situations such as the workplace and even societal barriers. This gives way to discrimination being normalized and through that, an infantilization of people with disabilities. The very few nuances of deaf people running a business or a business that employs people with Down syndrome and autism, should not just exist within the Klang Valley. There are an estimated 1.3 billion people experiencing a significant disability (which accounts for 1 in 6 of us), and on top of the daily life and balance they have to navigate, they are in danger of developing twice the risk for severe healthcare complications. When put into perspective, figures like these then do not seem like an afterthought.

There is an unfortunate display, alluding that specific laws are not needed to address issues of workplace discrimination disability, simply because it does not experience the same amount of traffic compared to our overseas partners. It shines a light on holes within the system and how even then, things are not taken as seriously. This sentiment then allows very real ramifications to be carried out, like people rejecting disabled people in the workplace, even before a chance to interview. A survey conducted by Vase.ai and Women’s Aid Organisation in 2020, had women with a permanent disability told by their recruiter they should consider freelancing instead.

It is a common misconception, and a harmful one that all people with disabilities are essentially not cut out to employ our level of understanding. That level of bias is something that able-bodied people are afforded to have. The lifts in the MRT stations are consistently out of order for months, sidewalks not being made big enough, and constant parking of handicapped spots; accessibility is not taken very seriously as disabled people are an afterthought. To change this, people in positions of prominence first and foremost, need to acknowledge what disabled people go through, regardless if there are NGOs and grassroots activism on the ground to help educate. To continue on the world stage, with Malaysia being a member of the World Health Organisation – which has pertinent guidelines for people with disabilities and how they are affected: there is a need to take these matters seriously, where the government introduces fair, just and forward-thinking laws that help us move forward.

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