The US presidential Election: Hope in Generational Shifts

Dr. Syaza Shukri | Associate Professor & Head, Department of Political Science, International Islamic University Malaysia | KSI Fellow

More than half the world's population has gone to the polls this past year with elections taking place in countries such as Pakistan, India, Indonesia, and Bangladesh. Yet, global attention was predominantly focused on the U.S. presidential election. With Donald Trump set to become the 47th President of the United States in January 2025, what can a nation in Southeast Asia understand from Trump's victory, and how might America's experience reflect on Malaysia's own political dynamics?

We can explore the cyclical nature of history, as theorized by Ibn Khaldun, the 14th-century Arab historian and philosopher, particularly regarding the rise and fall of civilizations. Numerous analyses question the durability of American exceptionalism, such as The End of American World Order by Amitav Acharya (2014), suggesting America is subject to historical cycles and is no more exceptional than others. In the present context, the election of Donald Trump and the rightward shift in politics align with a broader global trend. In Europe, the election of Giorgia Meloni's Brothers of Italy in 2022 and the Law and Justice Party (PiS) in Poland in 2023 exemplifies the rise of right-wing politics. Nevertheless, in 2024, these movements faced electoral challenges from the left, most notably in France and the UK, reflecting the dynamic political landscape across the world.

A striking parallel emerged in Malaysia when the Islamist populist party, Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS), led the Perikatan Nasional alliance to challenge Pakatan Harapan's dominance in the 2022 general election. Many at the time thought that the lowering of the voting age to 18 would lead to a bigger margin for left-leaning Pakatan Harapan, with the coalition itself championing it in their "Buku Harapan" manifesto in 2018. However, with Pakatan being in government from 2018 until 2020, there were more younger people dissatisfied with them than older generations (Merdeka Centre, 2019). A similar wave of surprise now sweeps across the United States with the question, "How could Gen-Z vote for Trump?" rooted in the assumption that young people naturally lean more liberal.

Two overlooked factors may explain this trend. Firstly, the formative years of today's youth were shaped during the COVID-19 lockdown, a period marked by uncertainty. Many remember Donald Trump as the leader during that tumultuous time, which may influence their political preferences. While critics focus on the fragmented response by the federal government, messaging discrepancies with health experts, and political interference in health agencies, Trump's supporters highlight achievements like rapid vaccine development (GAO, 2021). Similarly in Malaysia, Muhyiddin Yassin as prime minister of Perikatan Nasional during the pandemic was fondly referred to as 'Abah' or father.

Secondly, there's growing disillusionment among the youth with neoliberal policies. The 1990s and 2000s hailed the triumph of neoliberalism, but the 2008 financial crisis sparked questions about its sustainability, paving the way for MAGA-style protectionism. Cultural liberalism also faces scrutiny; debates over transgender rights and abortion took center stage in the recent election between Trump and Harris.

The backlash isn't against equality itself but against what some see as "illiberal liberalism"—a perception that certain progressive ideologies are being imposed. The lack of open, respectful discourse leaves many feeling patronized, much like when the Democrats criticized those who questioned their response to the Gaza war (Shalal & Singh, 2024). We are currently witnessing the cyclical, instead of evolutionary, development of political ideologies between liberalism and conservatism.

This cycle of history offers a lesson for Malaysia. Pakatan Harapan is perceived as the establishment today, with the reformist spirit perhaps having peaked in 2018. In contrast, advocates for Pakatan Harapan may champion equality, but not every Malaysian shares the same belief. Left-leaning liberal ideas are unsustainable without dialogue. As the unity government pushes for reforms, it is crucial to acknowledge the 30% of voters who supported Perikatan Nasional, including the estimated 37% from the youth (in contrast to 35% who voted for Pakatan) (Welsh, 2023). Ignoring their perspectives risks deepening national polarization. By considering diverse viewpoints and promoting open discussions, both Malaysia and the U.S. can navigate the challenges posed by evolving political landscapes, ensuring that progress reflects the entire society's diverse voices. People on the right may hold valid concerns, and bridging divides starts with listening. Liberal democracy thrives on compromise, not simple majority rule. It's crucial to keep political leanings balanced, fostering moderate positions on both sides.

The current rise of right-wing politics is daunting, considering its potential to veer towards extremism. After all, if time is truly a cycle, civilization may regress to when fascism was in fashion in the middle 20th century. History, however, shows that there is hope in cycles;—what goes up must come down. Whilst Gen Z engages with populist right-wing views due to the many crises facing this generation such as economic instability, environmental destabilization, polarization, and mental health concerns, future shifts could see Gen Alpha ushering back neoliberal principles if changes promised by the right do not materialize. Both in the U.S. and Malaysia, political figures like Trump and parties like PAS claim they deserve chances to prove their governance, but if they fail, change via the ballot box is possible. In the 1984 presidential election, Ronald Reagan won all the states except for Minnesota. A mere eight years later, Bill Clinton won for the Democratic Party, showing the impermanence of politics.

For democracy to work, people need to have access to information. Today, many consume media content believing they’re well-informed, yet often remain within echo chambers. Diverse perspectives have always existed, but agreeing on shared facts was the norm—a coherence increasingly fractured in our current media landscape. Words like "fake news," popularised during Trump's first term, illustrate this shift. The integrity of truth itself is questioned, often reducing dialogue to entrenched biases. Remedying this demands a commitment to factual discourse. There is no "post-truth"; reality either exists or it doesn't. Embracing these principles can help counteract polarising narratives and strengthen democratic resilience. This is where we need statesmen, not politicians, who will bring people together. Incumbents will fall but people will continue building the nation.

References

Acharya, A. (2014). The End of American World Order. Polity.
GAO. (2021, February 11). Operation Warp Speed: Accelerated COVID-19 Vaccine Development Status and Efforts to Address Manufacturing Challenges. https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-21-319
Merdeka Centre. (2019, Ju8ly 26). National Public Opinion Survey Perception Towards Direction, Leadership & Current Issues. https://merdeka.org/national-public-opinion-survey-perception-towards-direction-leadership-current-issues-2/
Shalal, A & Singh, K. (2024, August 24). Harris speech fails to win over critics in Democrats' biggest rift, Gaza. Reuters. https://www.reuters.com/world/democrats-biggest-rift-gaza-mostly-ignored-convention-2024-08-23/
Welsh, B. (2023, April 14). GE15 generational voting: Looking beyond ethnicity Part 2. Malaysiakini. https://www.malaysiakini.com/columns/662221