KSINSIGHTS

WHAT IS WORTH KNOWING?

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EDITORS NOTE



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WHAT IS WORTH KNOWING?

When it is championed that individualistic rhetoric leads to a piling against one another, thinking about what is important becomes brave in a sea of uncertainty. Behind what that uncertainty brings, there is anger and anguish.

This is for a system that does not listen and enables a vicious clawing in their pursuit to the top, forgetting sentimentality is at its core. That is vital as it lays the foundation to what we deem important in our lives, and how we achieve it. The negatives seem less arbitrary when it is looked at through the lens of emotion that seems to be missing from todays society.

To achieve a common goal borders on unworkable; what constitutes as worthy of time is such a large scope that seems impossible to understand, nevertheless to put words on paper for. The range is broad and rarely strips away the bare bones of such simplicity, making things murkier to digest and harder for us to find truth. This question does not quell us the way it should. We charter uncertainty in our foundations and change our bricks without warranty far too often, making it harder to answer.

Preconceptions that can fringe on abysmal and misconceptions become a false truth. The world will end many times, yet we wake up hoping tomorrow brings a new sun. This edition encapsulates that from our writers - patience, through a plethora of topics and the ambition in the pursuit of understanding a new endeavor.

KSI would like to extend their gratefulness and appreciation for the time taken to showcase the differing perspectives on how much these pieces mean to our cohort of fellows.

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THE END OF HISTORY AND TIME: IS CHANGE POSSIBLE OR AN ILLUSION?

Opinion

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A student of history would typically allude periods of time within history to dominant or general thought currents. This would be termed as *zeitgeist* or the *spirit of the times* in academic terms. The historian Eric Hobsbawm, in his article Identity Politics and the Left, highlighted how towards the late 20th century ideas and movements of nationalism had overtaken ideas of class and solidarity to become the dominant current in the political field.

A similar instance can be found in the case of Malaysia. The late 1990s were dominated by the ideas of Reformasi. Thousands converged in the landmark spaces of the city center in Kuala Lumpur through street rallies. The circumstances, or the spirit, of those times were unprecedented. The effects of the Reformasi movement and generation would linger on for the next decade, and many decades after. Some would argue that the Reformasi movement served as the impetus for the results of the 2008 General Elections, where for the first time the ruling Barisan Nasional coalition lost 5 states and its two-thirds majority in parliament.

As the clock turns and political currents change, there is now another distinctive moment in time. The era of adventure and of hope, at least as envisioned by what is known in common political parlance as the left or progressive movements, has now ended. Different scholars and analysts would pinpoint differing moments in the past 3 or 4 decades for the emergence of ideologies situated on the right of the political spectrum and populist in nature. The characteristics of such ideologies and movements are many and diverse even on the political right, but some overlapping traits include: the return to ethnic and cultural identity; the belief that there is an inherent origin or source, commonly cultural, which forms the foundation of the nation-state; the non-acceptance of communities known as *the others* within the confines of a defined society; and the distrust of establishment ruling elites but in some cases also the return of the old or traditional ruling elites.

From Europe, to the United States of America, and to Asia, what is known as forms of right, or far-right politics, has consolidated itself. In the region of Southeast Asia in particular, the old political elite have returned to power in the countries of the Philippines, Indonesia, and Thailand.

The term or label right and far right is contentious and complex to define. Equally the terms populist, even conservative, politics are difficult to define in times of instability and disruptions such as ours. Still, what is certain is that the era of political novelty and radicalism

where young and social movements that carry the vision of a world and society fundamentally different from what used to exist in the past or what we have at the present, are over. Political and social movements that previously offered glimmers of hope and possibilities of something new such as the political currents of the Labor groups under Jeremy Corbyn in the UK, the Future Forward Party in Thailand, the Democratic groups under Bernie Sanders, and even the pre-2018 form of the Reformasi movement and Parti Keadilan Rakyat, just to name a few, have now finished its social cycle or have evolved fundamentally.

There are many implications to this phenomenon. However, there are two consequences that are particularly pertinent in this discussion. The first is the societal incapacity for renewal and regeneration. In the absence of the existence of something new and different, or which at least aspires to be something new and different, there will be no future. As without the consciousness of the possible, there will be no change. Deprived of change, there will be no young and new generation. Without a new generation, the future will cease to exist. Many of those earlier currents and movements referred to above, attracted or gave rise to young and new communities because of hope and the struggle for something better.

The second is the continuous fragmentation and polarization of societies. A nation or society that seeks to rid itself of the others, within its borders or across borders, will continuously be in conflict or at war with itself in the form of its constituents. The interrelated effects of this clash will be the conditions of permanent instability. The core social fabric that holds the society together further diminishes or dissolves entirely.

Where does this leave things, where do things go from here? There are no answers or solutions to this predicament.

Nonetheless two lessons stand out. First is that political slogans and rhetoric must match concrete execution and the delivery of outputs. It likewise means that idealism must also be in congruence with reality. There are instances where hopes were raised high, and possibilities for change were promised. Yet communities on the ground neither saw nor felt the intended goals and outcomes.

Second, are the perils of political experiments, or adventures. The heydays of the global 1960s and 1970s, and of the 1990s and early 2000s in Malaysia, are no longer in existence and non-replicable. The problems of today are acutely complex and contradictory that have yet to be fully comprehended in their causes and future implications. Advancements in technologies such as artificial intelligence and the processes of climatic change are contributory factors to this state of affairs. In such conditions, the room for risk taking in the political field is immensely constrained.

Lessons such as these if unheeded will converge to create political disillusionment, and anger and resentment in society. As problems go unresolved, and lives cease to transform for the better. When this occurs, there will no longer be hope and faith in the idea of possibilities and for acts of change. When the future dissipates, the past will always haunt.

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MALAYSIA IS WELL-POSITIONED TO PURSUE NUCLEAR POWER

Critical Analysis

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Those are the words of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Director-General Rafael Mariano Grossi, whose assessment of Malaysia's nuclear power preparedness carries an immense weight of international authority [1]. That recognition rests on a coordinated national structure: the Implementation Coordination Committee for Nuclear Power Generation (JPPPTeN), chaired by the Deputy Prime Minister, overseeing six technical task forces spanning international agreements, project development, legal and regulatory frameworks, communications and stakeholder engagement, technology and industry development, and human capital development. Split between PETRA and MOSTI, with MyPOWER serving as the coordinating Nuclear Energy Program Implementing Organization (NEPIO) across the entire structure [2].

The IAEA's framework identifies 19 infrastructure areas that must be developed concurrently before a country is defined as truly ready to commission its first reactor [3]. Notably, "stakeholder engagement" sits among them, formally equal in status to financing, safety, and legal frameworks. The IAEA describes this infrastructure as requiring "strong and continuing support through all phases of a nuclear power program", and warns explicitly that nuclear communication "is a specialized field that should be placed in the hands of trained communications experts" [3].

On the technical and institutional dimensions, Malaysia is moving in the right direction. Be that as it may, the fundamental remains unaddressed. What is not moving at the same pace, and what has quietly determined the fate of Malaysia's nuclear ambitions before, is something more ambiguous to measure and easier to overlook: trust. The program did not collapse because the technology failed, nor because the regulations were inadequate; it collapsed because public sentiment eroded the political will that sustained it. Public sentiment erodes and remains stagnant when there is no narrative capable of rebuilding it. Nuclear power, in its simplicity, has never really been a technological problem in Malaysia; it is a trust problem, and trust is built or broken by the stories a country tells about its own capabilities.

This article examines how that trust was broken, why it remains broken, and what it would take to restore it.

Part 1: Built Early, Trusted Late

Malaysia possesses an outstandingly rich history in nuclear science, one that predates the country's independence itself.

As early as 1897, Taiping Hospital installed the first Roentgen ray apparatus in Malaya, just a year after Wilhelm Röntgen's discovery, and reportedly among the first to adopt it anywhere in the Far East [4]. By 1962, the country had established its first nuclear medicine department at Kuala Lumpur General Hospital, followed in 1968 by its first nuclear law, the Radioactive Substance Act [5]. This is Malaysia's first regulatory framework for radiation safety. Decades before nuclear power was ever conceived as a national ambition, Malaysia was already comfortable working with the atom.

The trajectory toward energy began in earnest in the 1970s. The Cabinet approved a nuclear research center in Bangi, leading to the establishment of Tun Ismail Atomic Research Center - Pusat Penyelidikan Tenaga Atom Tun Ismail (PUSPATI) in 1973. In 1982, the TRIGA PUSPATI research reactor achieved its first criticality, and a year later, the Nuclear Energy Unit (UTN) was formed under the Prime Minister's Department specifically to explore the adoption of nuclear power [6]. Regulatory maturity kept pace with technical ambition, where in 1984, Parliament passed the Atomic Energy Licensing Act (Act 304), establishing a comprehensive legal framework for licensing, control, and liability over atomic energy activities, consecutively leading to the formation of the Atomic Energy Licensing Board (AELB), now the Department of Atomic Energy, in 1985 [7]. In little more than a decade, Malaysia had built a research reactor, a dedicated policy unit, and a binding regulatory law: three pillars that, taken together, showcased deliberate national intent.

Yet, on nuclear power specifically, Malaysia remains lagging. If the technical and institutional foundation was present this early, the question becomes obvious - why did nuclear power never follow?

Part of the answer is not in how the world first learned what "nuclear" meant. Before Malaysians, or really anyone, ever encountered the idea of a reactor quietly generating electricity, the world had already been introduced to the devastating impact it had on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The bomb arrived in the global consciousness first, and nuclear power has spent eight decades trying to introduce itself to an audience that had already decided, emotionally, what nuclear meant.

Malaysia's own history compounded this. In 1982, the same year TRIGA PUSPATI achieved criticality, a separate and unrelated event unfolded in Bukit Merah, Perak. A rare earth processing facility operated by Asian Rare Earth Sdn Bhd began improperly disposing of radioactive waste, contaminating the surrounding community. The consequences were severe and documented: 11 deaths, birth defects, and a cluster of leukaemia cases within a community of just 15,000 people [8]. Bukit Merah was not a nuclear power accident; it was a rare earth processes failure, but to a public that did not draw fine distinctions between "nuclear" and "radioactive", the damage to trust was catastrophic. To make matters worse, the global memory of Chornobyl in 1986 and Fukushima in 2011 added fuel to the fire. Malaysians did not arrive at their skepticism of nuclear power irrationally; they arrived at it through a sequence of real, painful, and entirely understandable historical experiences, even though, technically, many of those experiences had little to do with nuclear power itself.

The political consequences followed predictably. Nuclear power was first seriously tabled in the late 2000s, only to be shelved after 2018, when Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad ruled out nuclear power plants, citing unresolved concerns over radioactive waste management [9]. The underlying public sentiment behind that reversal was already well documented: a 2015 survey by the Malaysian Association of Water and Energy Research found that only 2.1 percent of Malaysians believed the country was capable of safely managing a nuclear power plant, and a follow-up academic study the following year found that most respondents preferred renewable sources over nuclear power altogether [10]. The institutions built in the 1970s and 1980s did not disappear, but the momentum did, and with it, years of accumulated expertise and planning were left without a programme to serve. Twice now, Malaysia has arrived at the threshold of a decision and stepped back because the public conversation needed to sustain that decision was never properly made.

Part 2: Trust Once Broken, Stays Broken

Fear, once seeded, tends to outlive the conditions that planted it. Asian Rare Earth in Bukit Merah was decommissioned in 1994, and most Malaysians alive today have no direct memory of the disaster [11]. Yet the apprehension it produced did not fade at the same rate as the headlines. It was absorbed into something more durable: a cultural reflex, passed down less through personal experience than through inherited caution.

Trust is asymmetric by nature; it accumulates slowly, through years of unremarkable, well-run operation, but can be erased almost instantly by a single failure, regardless of how unrelated that

failure technically is to the technology in question. This is precisely why Bukit Merah, a rare earth accident with no connection to nuclear power generation whatsoever, could still leave a nuclear-shaped scar. Trust does not parse technical distinctions. It only remembers whether something it was told was safe, turned out to be otherwise.

This dynamic is already shaping how Malaysia approaches one of the most basic questions any nuclear newcomer must answer: what happens to the fuel once it is spent? Across newcomer nuclear states, there is a pull toward vendor arrangements built around fuel take-back which is agreements in which the supplying country agrees to reclaim spent fuel rather than have it remain in the host country. It would not be surprising if Malaysia's own vendor evaluation appears to be moving in the same direction, given how closely the country's emerging program mirrors this broader pattern.

It is worth asking why this has become the default starting position, rather than one option weighed among several. The honest answer is not a technical one. It is "not in my backyard" - a public, and by extension, a policy environment that has never been given the opportunity to see spent fuel as anything other than a danger to be exported, never as a material with its own science, its own handling expertise, and its own economic potential [12]. Fuel take-back may well remain the most judicious near-term arrangement for a newcomer program. There is a meaningful difference between choosing it because it is genuinely the best option and defaulting to it because the trust deficit was never addressed in the first place. Malaysia's policy is, at present, being quietly designed around that deficit rather than confronting it directly.

This is the cycle Malaysia has not yet broken. Trust erodes, and institutions design around the erosion rather than confronting it. The public is never given the opportunity to revise its understanding, and the trust stays exactly where it is.

This is not a unique Malaysian dilemma, as international experience confirms the same pattern. At an IAEA technical meeting on stakeholder involvement, the Philippines' permanent representative to the United Nations put the point plainly: the trust of the public in the institutions tasked with establishing a nuclear power program has to be earned [13]. The IAEA's own review of that meeting offers a strikingly applicable diagnosis: public backlash and negative sentiment can typically be traced to cases where communication and public involvement were overlooked by the authorities responsible - precisely the failure mode Malaysia has now experienced twice.

Trust, in other words, is not a courtesy extended to the public once the technical work is done. It is itself part of the technical work, formally listed as one of the 19 infrastructure issues a nuclear newcomer must develop. However, it is still the one most easily deprioritized, precisely because its absence does not show up on an engineering audit.

The question Part 3 turns to is whether it should remain this way. The short answer is no.

Part 3: Building Trust on a Five-Year Clock

Trust once broken is not unrecoverable. Finland offers an outstanding example. In 1983, public support for nuclear power sat below 25%, but by 2024, it had surged up to 61% [14]. The technology has improved over those four decades, certainly, but the more decisive shift was in the relationship between the public and institutions managing it. The clearest evidence of that shift sits beneath the granite bedrock of Eurajoki, a municipality of roughly 9,000 people now hosting Onkalo, the world's first permanent repository for spent nuclear fuel. Decades of transparency, consistent community engagement, and revenue-sharing turned a community that could have become the center of national opposition into one of nuclear power's strongest domestic advocates [15].

The UAE offers a second, more transferable lesson. Before Barakah became the Arab world's first commercial nuclear power plant, public discourse around it followed the same pattern visible in most of the world: numbers, safety statistics, and regulatory jargon. What changed that pattern was a conscious decision to put Emirati engineers, operators, and trainees in front of the public [16]. The Energy Pioneers Program, launched in 2009, sent young Emiratis abroad to train in nuclear engineering specifically so the workforce running Barakah would be visibly, recognisably Emirati [17]. By the time the plant began supplying a quarter of the country's electricity, nuclear power in the UAE was no longer an abstraction managed by foreign experts; it had a local face.

Malaysia does not need to copy either country's exact path. However, both point toward the same underlying principle; trust is not won by correcting public misunderstanding with better facts. It is won by proximity, consistency, and faces that the public can recognize as their own.
Five practical shifts, achievable within the next five years follow directly from that principle.

1. Open the facilities. Malaysia already operates a research reactor at TRIGA PUSPATI. Public open days, structured school visits, and media access cost little compared to the trust dividend they generate. As the saying

goes, seeing is believing. For most visitors, this will be their first encounter, watching a dosimeter register nothing more than ordinary background radiation while standing meters from an operating reactor, observing workers simply going about their day. That single experience does more to correct a wrongly-formed fear than any safety statistic could.

2. Give nuclear a face. Malaysians have grown comfortable with oil and gas not because that industry publishes more transparent data than the nuclear sector, but because it has a visible human presence, careers that are familiar, aspirational, and locally rooted. Nuclear, by contrast, is still represented almost entirely by monotonous facts, daunting physics, and bewildering figures. Malaysia should identify and support a cohort of credentialed, enthusiastic Malaysian scientists and engineers willing to be the public face of the field. This is the way the UAE's Barakah teams became recognisable individuals rather than an anonymous workforce. Malaysia needs its own version of that voice, addressing Malaysian concerns specifically.

3. Answer the question the public is actually asking. Most Malaysians do not want a physics lecture. They want a straightforward answer to a straightforward question: "will this hurt me, or will it make my life better?" Public engagement strategies built around explaining reactor design or radiation physics consistently miss this. The more effective approach starts by listening and gathering public concerns directly, before deciding what to communicate. This is precisely what the IAEA's own stakeholder engagement guidance recommends for Phase 1 of any nuclear program: survey public knowledge and concerns first, and design the public information strategy around the answers, not the other way around [3].

4. Confidence wins trust, hesitation kills it. On 31 July 2025, the government announced that nuclear energy would be implemented as part of the national energy mix, with operations targeted for 2031 [18]. By middle 2026, that framing had evolved: the public message shifted toward Malaysia deciding on the use of nuclear energy only after 2030 [19]. This evolution is not, in itself, unreasonable as feasibility studies take time, and refining a timeline as new information emerges is a normal part of responsible policymaking. The public rarely experiences a timeline shift as careful refinement. It experiences it as a change in the story it was first told, and even well-justified adjustments can be read as institutional uncertainty if they are not communicated with equal clarity to the original announcement. This is not an argument against caution where due diligence matters, and a nuclear program should never be rushed for the sake of appearances. It becomes an argument however, for matching every shift in technical position with an equally deliberate shift in public communication, so that prudence is understood as prudence, and not mistaken for hesitation.

5. Build the foundation a generation early. None of the above will hold if it is not reinforced in classrooms. Early nuclear literacy shapes students' first impressions, giving the next generation a different starting point than the one their parents inherited. This does not require an entirely new subject, only additional classroom activities or modules that introduce students to the safe applications of nuclear technology in power generation, medicine, and industry. Within the next five years, Malaysia should set a clear goal: by the time a Malaysian student first hears the word "nuclear," they should have already encountered it in the context of its safe, everyday applications and not the catastrophes alone.

None of these five shifts requires Malaysia to resolve its hardest technical questions first. They require something more achievable within a five-year window: a sustained and continuous investment in the people, platforms, and habits that build trust the way every successful nuclear program has built it.

Malaysia's nuclear story has never lacked capability, but it has lacked in the conversation the country has never quite finished having with itself. Twice, the technical groundwork was sound, the regulatory architecture concrete, and the ambition genuine, and twice, that was not enough. What was missing both times was not a better reactor design or a more comprehensive law -it was a public that had been brought along with the process, not informed of it only after. The good news, if there is one, is that this is the most solvable problem Malaysia's nuclear program faces. Finland and the UAE prove this in two very different ways, and it can be built within the timeframe Malaysia has already set for itself. The five years between now and the next major decision point are not only a waiting period for feasibility studies to conclude. It will be the only window in which the narrative can be rebuilt before, rather than after.

Malaysia is, by the IAEA's own assessment, well-positioned to pursue nuclear power.

The technology is ready, and the institutions are forming. What remains is the harder, more human aspect, making sure that the next time Malaysia stands at this threshold, it does not step back for the same reason it did twice before.

The reactor was never the problem; the story was. This time, Malaysia has the chance to tell it differently

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POLITICAL STABILITY AND ISLAM

Opinion

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Malaysia is heading into its second general election since the fall of Barisan Nasional in 2018. For more than six decades, it was what Antonio Gramsci would call hegemony—a situation in which power becomes so entrenched and normalised that alternatives become difficult to imagine. Barisan Nasional's dominance was not merely electoral, but it shaped the expectations of politics itself. For many Malaysians, it was almost impossible to imagine a government without Barisan Nasional. Then the impossible became possible. Eight years later, there is still a grapple with what it means to have multiple parties and coalitions realistically vying for the possibility to govern following the 16th general election (GE16).

The question many Malaysians are asking today however, is how much competition is too much? The liberal answer is straightforward: the more competition, the better. More parties mean more choices, and political actors are compelled to offer better ideas and leadership. Yet economics teaches us that competition does not always produce desirable outcomes. After decades of neoliberalism, there has been growing unease with the excesses of unfettered markets (Stiglitz, 2024). Inequality persists, monopolies emerge, and despite unprecedented wealth and the creation of the first trillionaire in 2026 (Forbes, 2026), poverty, food insecurity, wars, and environmental degradation remain.

If this logic is transposed to politics, competition is supposed to encourage innovation. Producers are expected to come up with better products and better services to attract consumers but many businesses have discovered that it is easier and more profitable to sell cheaper products that provide instant gratification than long-term value, including what has been described as the "enshittification" of online services (Chayka, 2025). Perhaps politics is no different. In a race to the bottom, parties may end up offering "cheap" products. These products are not better policies or long-term solutions, but simple answers to complex problems, emotional appeals, and convenient scapegoats. Sentiment becomes more valuable than substance because it delivers votes in the short term. These are, after all, some of the ingredients that have fuelled populism around the world, including right-wing populism in Malaysia (Shukri, 2023).

Yet competition itself is not the problem. Instability emerges when political actors stop believing in the democratic rules of the game. If parties believe their opponents will manipulate institutions to remain in power, they will do the same. Distrust becomes self-reinforcing. Nostalgia for the "good old days" resurfaces. Stability, as it is told, was easier but comes at a price. Like monopolised markets, political monopolies deprive citizens of meaningful choices, and their costs eventually catch up.

This is not saying that fragmentation is always desirable; the opposite danger deserves equal attention. Faced with intense electoral competition, there may be pressure for Malay-based parties in Malaysia to eliminate competition amongst themselves in the name of unity and stability as we are seeing today with talks about Perikatan Nasional uniting the ummah, including through possible cooperation with Umno (Malay Mail, 2026). This has become reality with Umno and PAS working together under an "understanding" for the Negeri Sembilan state election (Annuar, 2026). Such a development could gradually return Malaysia to a form of one-party (Malay) predominance. This would diminish meaningful political choice and weaken the competitive pressures that encourage accountability.

Indeed, calls for political consolidation are often justified by the fear that the "wrong" actors may gain power. In Malaysia, one manifestation of this anxiety concerns the possibility of Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS) becoming dominant. Critics fear that Islamists will use democracy to gain power only to dismantle it afterwards as captured by the phrase "one man, one vote, one time" (Telhami, 2008). Unfortunately, these anxieties are not unique to Malaysia. Around the world, fears about Islamist movements have often spilled over into fears about Islam itself. Muslims are increasingly viewed through the lens of extremism and perpetual suspicion. The result has been not merely prejudice, but at times violence itself, such as the mosque attack in San Diego (Al-Marashi, 2026). The challenge then is not to eliminate competition (including by Islamists), but to ensure that competition takes place within accepted democratic rules and norms.

Perhaps the deeper issue is not fear of "others" itself but it is what fear does to politics. In an age where opponents are viewed as existential threats, outrage becomes a political resource. Anger signals authenticity while compromise becomes betrayal. The louder one condemns, the more committed one appears. Politics ceases to reward prudence and begins to reward moral certainty. Religion does not stand outside this logic but it is absorbed into it.

In many Muslim societies, especially in highly mediated and politically competitive environments, public expressions of faith increasingly reward visibility and symbolic defence. The pressure to demonstrate commitment can encourage forms of religiosity that privilege denunciation, confrontation, and emotional intensity. The 2016–2017 mobilisations against former Jakarta governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok) in Indonesia demonstrated how religion could serve as markers of political allegiance. To defend Islam, it sometimes appears, is to condemn faster, speak louder, and display outrage more visibly.

Yet Islam sits uneasily with outrage as a moral posture. The Qur'an describes the Prophet Muhammad not through domination or fury but through gentleness: "It is by mercy from God that you were gentle with them. Had you been harsh and hard-hearted, they would have dispersed from around you" (3:159). The lesson is political as much as it is spiritual. Authority rooted in harshness eventually alienates. Trust is sustained not through intimidation but through character.

This is not an argument for passivity. Rather, it is a reminder that moral seriousness is not synonymous with rage. Politics should not merely be about defeating multiple imagined enemies or preserving unfettered power: it should be about improving lives. Just as economic debates increasingly emphasise sustainability rather than endless growth, Islamic politics should move beyond merely winning elections.

That is what is worth knowing today. The real danger Malaysians face as the country heads into more elections in the next few months is not too many parties, nor too much competition, nor even religion itself. It is the temptation to transform political differences into existential struggles and moral outrage into a substitute for ethics. Diversity is not dangerous and religion is not necessarily a threat to pluralism. Democracies, like markets, require norms and restraints. At its best, religion can serve not as a weapon against rivals, but as an ethical compass that reminds us that politics is ultimately about bettering society rather than destroying one's enemies. That is how we achieve stability.

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HISTORICAL THINKING IN AN AGE OF INSTANT ANSWERS

Critical Analysis

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The world has entered an era where knowledge discourse no longer remains scarce or private. Instead, information has become a ubiquitous commodity, which can be retrieved in seconds by artificial intelligence and search algorithms. The distinguishing character about the current modern era is that facts are becoming cheaper, while disciplined ways of thinking are becoming increasingly scarce. When a society intentionally, or otherwise, abuses the concept of instant answers as the ultimate solution to life by changing it to the sole ownership of algorithms, this would be a sure-fire symptom of declining intellectual rigor.

It can be assumed instant access to information creates an enlightened society. Unfortunately, reality suggests the opposite. As facts become cheaper, the framework required to understand them have become increasingly, and understandably, pushed aside. Artificial intelligence retrieves data in milliseconds, yet this luxury produces cognitive paralysis rather than clarity. This article argues that what is currently missing is not data, but discipline. There must be an understanding within the capacity to interrogate evidence, identify hidden biases, construct context, separate continuity from anomaly and arrive at sound judgment that cannot be automated.

Therefore, the central crisis of this ultra digital age is an epistemic one. The retrieval of text has been confused with the possession of truth. It shall also be argued that the most valuable knowledge today is not information, but the structured navigation of historical thinking. To navigate this, the most valuable cognitive tool is not computational thinking, but historical thinking. What is historical thinking? First and foremost, a cease in viewing history as a static catalogue of the past, instead treat it as an active methodology for the present. It requires to collect evidence, interrogate them, map behavioural patterns across their social contexts and analyse the cascading effects of past human decisions, through the advantages exploited and the mistakes made.

INTERROGATING INFORMATION

"A search engine offers quick and confident, yet deluded certainty. A historical mind, on the other hand, almost always assumes deception first"

It has been normalised to ask the preferred AI tool something. In its faithful nature, it answers immediately. With such a speed, the experience is elating. By now, however, there is a jaded hand in understanding that when an algorithm answers a query, it presents an already synthesized and frictionless output. Meaning, it has stripped away the friction of origin, authorship, intent, motivation and context. The user receives a fact devoid of the human messy reality that produced it. When this is done long and frequent enough, minds get conditioned to

accept information passively. When it is consumed passively, a failure to give meaning to the object of the study is stark.

The article would like to present a balanced tool to intervene this passive consumption; historical methodology. Historical methodology operates on the inverse principle. A historian or anyone with a historical mind, confronts a primary source with suspicion. Who wrote this? Why was it recorded? What was left unsaid? If a document from the nineteenth century claims a diplomatic victory, the historian does not read it as fact. Instead, it is read t as a calculated narrative.

This specific scepticism is exactly what is required to navigate digital ecosystems. AI hallucinations, over-confidence, deepfakes, biases and algorithmic summaries are the modern equivalents of forged documents and biased chronicles. Therefore, an intellectual failure occurs when digital outputs are treated as infallible or even neutral for that matter. In the counter-measure to avoid this intellectual failure, the mind needs to constantly ask what is the evidence for this claim, and who benefits from its acceptance. A clear line of defence against automated misinformation.

In historical research, primary sources are never accepted at face value. Historians interrogate them by asking who produced them, for what purpose, under what circumstances, whose voices may be missing, and whose voices and narratives may be inflated. Today's consumers of digital information should adopt the same habit. Algorithms increasingly present information as objective and authoritative while obscuring the intentions, assumptions, interests and values behind the content they deliver. Inversely, historical thinking reminds us that evidence is never self-explanatory. It should be contemplated, questioned, contextualised, interpreted and weighed against biases, even (especially) our own. By approaching digital information with the same critical discipline, individuals move beyond passive consumption and become more conscious, responsible, ethical, active and independent readers.

RECOGNISING BIAS BOTH HUMAN AND ALGORITHMIC

"We were told that that old history was written by the victors. Now, we fail to recognize the modern victors are algorithms"

Historiography teaches that no human record is neutral. Every archive is a curated selection of what a specific society deemed valuable. Many narratives often circled around the modalities that would benefit a small powerful group (read: capitalism). Consequently, the voices of the marginalized are frequently erased, while the justifications of the powerful are preserved. A historically trained mind would recognize this human bias. The recognition requires stepping outside one's own cultural assumptions to evaluate the motives of the author, curator or owner of the narrative.

One of the greatest misconceptions of the AI age is that digital outputs are inherently objective. In distancing ourselves from human judgement, an assumption has been made that escaping human bias is part of the normal, when it very well is not. Algorithmic bias is often human bias translated into code; human judgement disappears behind the illusion of mathematical neutrality, and is presented with the authority of machine intelligence. What appears neutral is frequently no more than a different expression of familiar assumptions and preferences. AI search results and language models are trained with a vast number of datasets that reflect *existing* human prejudices, structural inequalities, political propaganda, marketing tactics and dominant cultural narratives. An algorithm optimizing for engagement will inevitably surface sensationalism over nuances.

When a user lacks historical thinking, they view an algorithmic feed as an objective reflection of reality. A historically trained mind recognizes it as a curated archive and built by a specific demographic, while optimizing for a specific corporate or political goal. Understanding that technology inherits the biases of its creators allows the individual to reclaim agency over their own worldview. Fault definitely shouldn't be put on the technology alone to have shaped how a person thinks, values, acts and behaves. *He himself shall have the responsibility to mobilize and be conscious of his own conscience.* Recognizing bias requires a total disengagement from one's own assumptions, which is a suspension of immediate judgment, to critically evaluate why certain information is presented as such and who it ultimately serves.

CONTEXT MUST ALWAYS MATTER

"Any data that is void of context, is not knowledge. At best, an isolated fragment of information. At worst, a convenient tool for misunderstanding and distortion"

The digital economy thrives on decontextualization. A twelve second video clip, or a misdirected quote, or an isolated statistic stripped from the dynamics of other factors. When they are fed into a timeline, it provokes a reaction where the user reacts to the content without ever understanding the conditions that birthed it. The failure of context daily in modern political discourse where often, complex

geopolitical conflicts are reduced to binary moral choices on social media. In addition, algorithms reward absolute claims and punish nuance.

Historical thinking rejects the isolated fact and the exercise of accepting contents without context. An event is meaningless without its social, religious, economic, political and cultural skeleton. For example, the fall of the Berlin Wall is just broken concrete unless one understands how communism and socialism became a political force and military propaganda, what entailed in the Cold War, the Soviet economic stagnation and human psychology. The 1874 Treaty of Pangkor would be just a localized royal succession dispute unless one factors in the global industrial demand for tin, Chinese secret society proxy wars and how the British pivoted their colonial strategy from trade to direct intervention. The 1258 siege of Baghdad is just the burning of a library unless one understands the political fragmentation of the late Abbasid caliphate, internal conspiracy and betrayal, Mongol expansion mechanics and the resulting shift of global Islamic power to Cairo.

An isolated fact is meaningless without the human factors and conditions that produced it. The growth and development of an individual's intellect according to this framework would have a higher rank of determination if they actively sought context. Historical thinking demands that the surrounding architecture of an event or a fact is looked at. It forces the mind to reconstruct the environment around the fact. It asks why an event happened when it did and where it did. This disciplined search for context slows down the immediate and emotional reaction that digital platforms are engineered to exploit. When humans recognize that isolated facts are directly related to the bigger socio-political environments, they will realize the depth of the subject. Humble realizations would in turn create a more ethical perspective and humility in modern thinkers.

THE ILLUSION OF UNPRECEDENTED TIMES

"Every generation suffers from the myopia of the present and is convinced its crises are entirely novel. This digital age has accelerated this narcissism"

It is frequently heard that political polarization, propaganda, new infections and economic disruption are "unprecedented." Such rhetoric encourages the illusion that our age is uniquely unstable, and it is obscuring the historical continuities that might otherwise help us understand the present. Unsurprisingly, this is caused by a lot of political and media struggles that prioritize sensationalism. Throughout the decades of digital interpretation, society again and again turns its back against the historical outlook in order to feel unique in its modern suffering or triumph.

Historical thinking distinguishes continuity from change. It recognizes what is genuinely new versus what is simply a new iteration of an old human behaviour. Yes, the architecture of the global internet is novel. No, the dissemination of state-sponsored propaganda to control a populace is not. Yes, the speed of digital markets is new. No, the boom-and-bust cycle driven by human greed is not, it is actually ancient.
By identifying the historical precedents of modern crises, the perceived chaos of the present can now become legible. When underlying human continuities are recognised, modern crises are stripped of their paralyzing uniqueness. The past must be looked at to understand the predictable ways human beings react to technological and social disruption.

THE BURDEN OF JUDGEMENT

"Information retrieval is automated. Discernment should not be"

The ultimate aim of both historical study and modern civic life is sound judgment. It is the synthesis of questioned evidence, recognized bias, understood context and identified continuity. This is an uncomfortable and labour-intensive process. It requires holding contradictory ideas and tolerating ambiguity, while accepting that absolute certainty is rarely possible. AI and the likes are so appealing because technology promises to relieve us of this burden. Outsourcing judgment is not efficient. Instead, it is an abdication of intellect. When systems are relied on to do a fundamental such as thinking, it erodes the capacity to govern oneself. The danger of the information age is not that machines will become conscious and decide to destroy us. The danger is that humans will willingly surrender the friction of thinking and find it easier to accept an algorithm's summary rather than to interrogate the world themselves.

Historical thinking is, therefore, an ethic of intent rather than mere consequence. It requires the individual to look for scattered data and make an acceptable level of systems thinking from those data points, question evidence, recognize biases and understand context to make civic, responsible, political and personal decisions. This is where the concept of disciplined thinking against passive consumption starts to materialize. The moral of a man is defined by his will, and that will shall be governed by disciplined inquiry. When an individual decides to choose this goodness over an agreed communal intellectual laziness, an ethically and informationally sick society would be able to progress.

Valuing historical thinking is not about preserving the past. It is among the only mechanisms available to ensure that in an age of infinite answers, the ability to retain the right to ask the right questions remains at the forefront.

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WHAT IF GST HAD NOT BEEN SCRAPPED?

Opinion

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When asked in parliament in 2019 about the government's position on reintroducing the Goods and Services Tax (GST), then-Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir replied that he was confident the Sales and Service Tax (SST) would, in the years to come, generate more revenue than the GST ever had.He foretold the truth. Malaysia's SST collection eventually reached RM55.9billion, outperforming the last full year of GST collection in 2017, but taking eight years to happen, even then, only after the tax base was widened and the service tax rate raised from 6% to 8% in 2024.

GST and SST nonetheless belong to the same family of consumption taxes, since in both cases the ultimate burden falls on the consumer. The mechanism by which this happens, however, is not equally visible.

Under GST, the tax is explicit at every transaction, itemised on the receipt for each purchase. Under SST, by contrast, the tax is levied upstream on the producer, which makes its incidence far less obvious to the person actually paying it. But producers rarely absorb a tax cost. Instead, they pass it downstream through a proportional increase in the selling price. The consumer, once again, is the one left holding the bill.

That SST needed eight years, a wider base, and a higher rate to match what GST had already achieved says as much about the relative efficiency of the two systems as any direct comparison could.

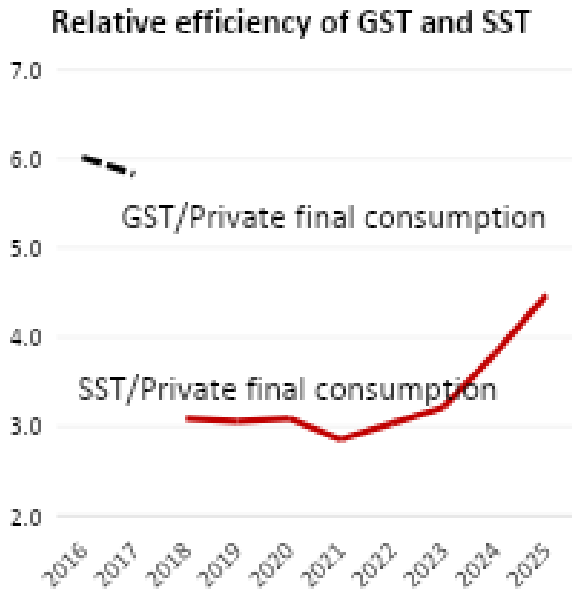
Restating a conclusion most people have already accepted is not, in itself, very interesting. The more useful question is the counterfactual one: what if GST had never been abolished in 2018, and had instead remained in force through to today? What revenue would it now be generating? How might that change the way we talk about fiscal consolidation and subsidy reform?

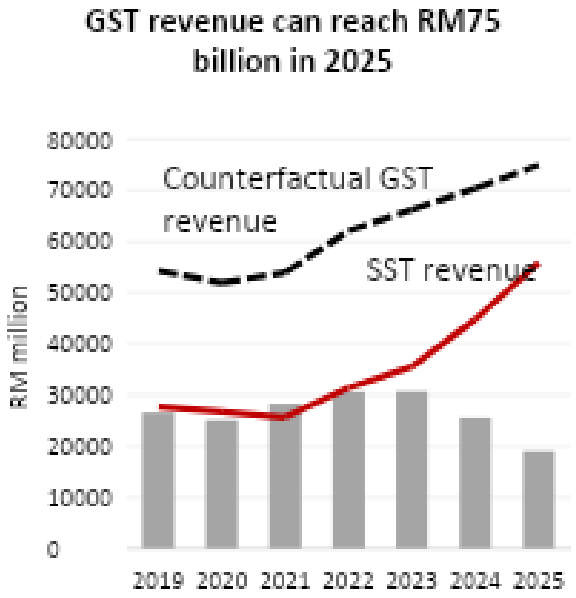
The first step in answering this would be to find a denominator that allows us to compute counterfactual GST revenue for the years that followed. The obvious candidate is private final consumption expenditure, since GST is a tax on consumption.

In 2016 and 2017, GST revenue stood at RM41.2 billion and RM44.3 billion, respectively. Against a private final consumption expenditure of RM684.7 billion and RM760.1 billion in those same years, the GST-to-consumption ratio worked out to 6% in both years, tracking the statutory GST rate almost exactly. This is a ratio SST has never matched, as Figure 1 illustrates, and it points to the same underlying inefficiency noted earlier: SST taxes more broadly and at a higher rate, yet still collects less per ringgit of consumption.

Assuming that the 6% GST rate had remained

unchanged and that the system retained at least the same efficiency, we can apply that ratio to private final consumption expenditure from 2018 onward to construct a counterfactual GST revenue series. Figure 1 plots the result. Counterfactual GST revenue would have exceeded actual SST revenue every year, likely approaching RM75 billion by 2025. The gap between the two holds fairly steady at around RM30 billion for most of the period, narrowing to roughly RM20 billion only after 2024, when the SST's tax scope was widened and the service tax rate raised.





Note: GST revenue is simulated based on two assumptions: GST rate remains unchanged at 6%, and the GST revenue-private final consumption expenditure ratio approximates the historical 6%.
Source: BNM, DOSM

Figure 1: Counterfactual GST Revenue

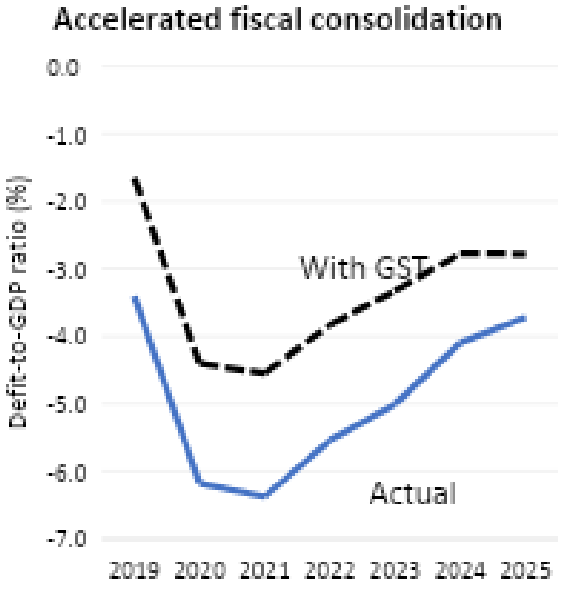
As depicted in Figure 2, the excess GST revenue of RM20 billion to RM30 billion every year has no shortcomings:

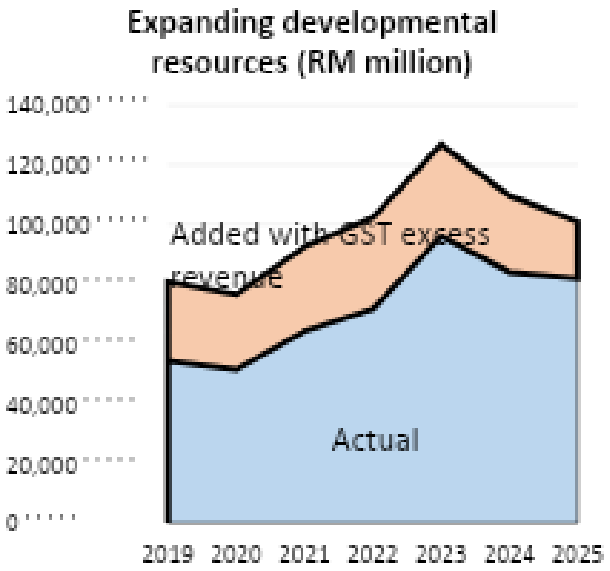
1. With the added tax revenue, the overall fiscal deficit becomes far less alarming. By 2024 the government would already have attained a deficit-to-GDP ratio below 3%, satisfying the requirements of the Fiscal Responsibility Act.

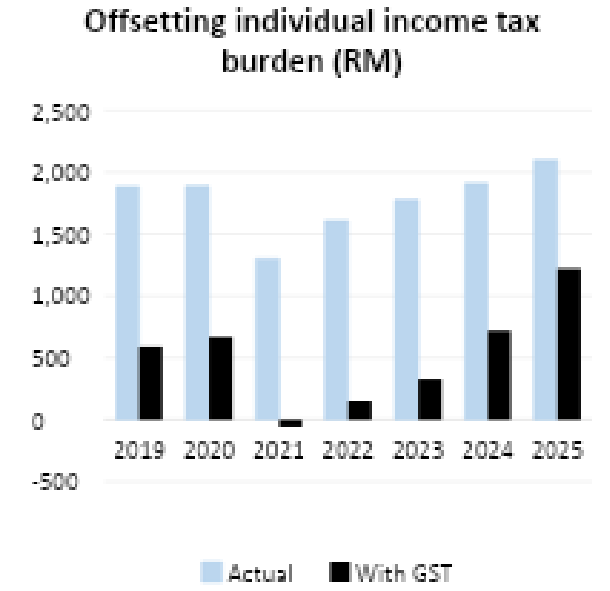
2. Development expenditure on healthcare, education, grants for industrial transformation, and more would have exceeded RM100 billion each year since 2022 if this additional revenue had been put to use.

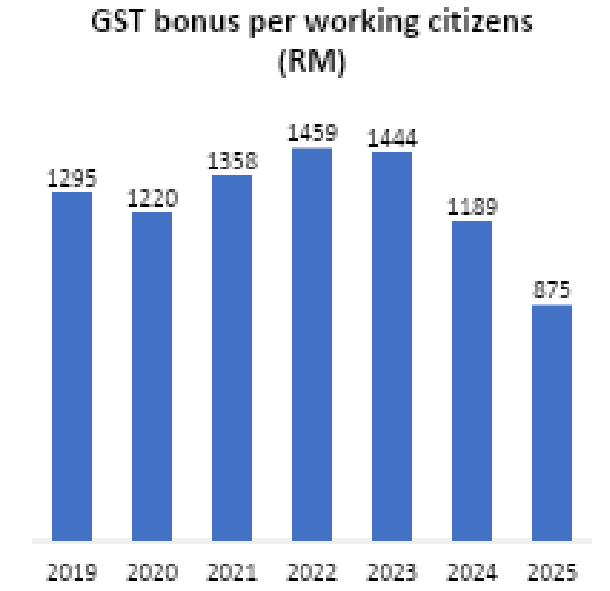
3. By harmonising the consumption and income tax regimes, where all GST revenue exceeding a pre-announced annual target is rebated directly as a reduction in individual income tax for all taxpayers, the average income tax burden per working citizen would fall to a few hundred ringgit, in some cases to almost nothing.

4. If all revenue exceeding the pre-announced annual GST target were returned to working citizens as a national bonus, then each citizen would find themselves richer by more than a thousand ringgit.









Note: Average individual income tax burden is computed by dividing total individual income tax revenue by the numbers of working citizens.
Source: BNM, DOSM

Figure 2: Making Good Use of Excess GST Revenue for Sustainable Efficiency and Equity

It is not beyond imagination to claim that we could achieve a system that is sustainably efficient, yet also equitable, by bundling consumption tax with income tax or subsidy programmes.

Take scenario (iii): to enroll in the GST rebate via income tax reduction, a citizen must first obtain a tax identification number. The mechanism thus gives citizens working in the informal economy an incentive to register. As more and more citizens self-enrol into such a tax-benefit bundle, the national system becomes more inclusive, and, in turn, more efficient to implement.Even where the GST rebate takes the form of a direct cash transfer, this bundle remains distinct from conventional subsidy and cash-transfer programmes because it is self-funded, drawn from GST revenue collected in excess of target. A cash transfer of this kind does not raise the usual concern of squeezing fiscal space.

GST bundled with a national dividend, moreover, becomes a progressive system in its own right, as lower-income families tend to spend less in absolute terms and so pay less consumption tax overall, while having more members eligible for the bonus.

A tax reform needs only follow three steps: design it to be as economically efficient as possible, pre-announce the revenue target so expectations are set correctly, and honour the commitment by letting everyone share in the benefit through direct transfer. This creates a system that is sustainably efficient and equitable; a system that everyone can embrace.

WHAT'S IN A QUOTA?

Opinion

HYREN GAN
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On the 22nd of June, as part of my internship with a Member of the Selangor State Legislative Assembly, I joined fellow colleagues and party members in supporting Projek30%, an initiative backed by NGOs including EMPOWER, Bersih, Mandiri, and the Association of Women Lawyers. The campaign advocates for a minimum quota requiring that 30% of candidates fielded in all Malaysian elections be women.

In a wave of purples and pinks, the steps of solidarity and purpose rang throughout the streets of Kuala Lumpur as footsteps headed up Jalan Parlimen to deliver a memorandum, calling for the introduction of a new policy that would change the face of Malaysian politics. Waiting patiently under the boiling June sun, the Members of Parliament soon emerged from the ever-imposing Dewan Rakyat building, receiving the papers that outlined an intention for a future in a more equal and participatory Malaysia.

The solution? The introduction of a new quota.

For many Malaysians, the word "quota" often evokes an immediate sense of discomfort or outrage. Given the country's history and the role of quotas in shaping public policy, such reactions are perhaps unsurprising. Should the mere mention of a "quota" be enough to dismiss a proposal before its merits are considered?

After the May 13 Racial Riots of 1969, the New Economic Policy (NEP) was established by the Malaysian government as a means to improve the living conditions of all citizens through a series of mechanisms that prioritised disadvantaged demographics. The Bumiputera quota system was at the forefront of the policy, reserving a specified proportion of opportunities and assets for Bumiputera citizens across the education, business, and private sectors. Although this approach prioritised equity over equality, the aim was to promote racial parity amongst all races, ensuring that Malaysia would function as a truly representative and inclusive society for everyone.

Nevertheless, this anticipated vision of a more just Malaysia never panned out as expected. Today, policies such as the 90% Bumiputera quota for matriculation colleges, or the opaque Bumiputera admissions quota in place at public universities remain a source of frustration for many Malaysians, with many perceiving it as contrary to the principles of fairness or meritocracy.

In the corporate sphere, requirements such as the allocation of 12.5% of shares to Bumiputera investors during an initial public offering on Bursa Malaysia, alongside mandates reserving 30% to 50% of housing units in new developments for Bumiputera buyers, are often criticised for introducing additional constraints on the free market and business operations. Instead of promoting a harmonious future devoid of racial distinctions, the public perception and real impacts of NEP quotas have left deep scars on the Malaysian psyche when discussing the removal or maintenance of such systems.

Cognizant of the complex history that outlines the interactions with quotas, during the event, a participant exclaimed that "women had to fight for themselves" and vehemently opposed any introduction of a women's quota in politics. While opinions of this nature can easily evoke frustration or offense, the remark prompted a deeper reflection on the issue at hand. Why does the introduction of a quota often provoke such strong feelings of injustice, while the disadvantages faced by the group it seeks to uplift receive far less attention?

The divisive public discourse regarding any sort of affirmative action allocation is not exclusive to Malaysia, but occurs in other parts of the world too. In the United States, the 2023 Supreme Court case Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard displayed widespread polarisation in regards to how universities should view race when deciding to admit or deny applications. In India, the Reservation System often sparks mass demonstrations, as quotas are deemed to either be too exclusionary or inclusionary for certain castes.

The intensity of these reactions towards quotas, however, often risks shifting attention away from the underlying inequalities they seek to address, placing undue emphasis on the policy instrument rather than the circumstance that necessitates its introduction.

Quotas are simply tools to assist policymakers, rather than the actual problem itself. In an optimal world, quotas would never be necessary as systemic barriers would not exist and representation would naturally reflect the diversity of society. Reality is always different—as an attempt to deconstruct historical obstacles, quotas are implemented as a timely and visible method to increase marginalised representation. The anger arises when these systems are either never removed, or when they seek to benefit the ruling class and have already exhausted their usefulness.

Criticisms regarding quotas should be taken seriously, as in certain areas - such as tertiary education attainment among the workforce - the numerical gap between Bumiputera, Chinese, and Indian Malaysians has narrowed significantly, with groups reaching near parity in terms of representation. Despite this progress, challenges remain beyond participation rates. Within the Bumiputera community, concerns persist regarding differences in graduate quality, skills development, and the outcomes produced by educational attainment. The issue then is not simply whether access has been expanded, but whether these policies are effective in addressing the deeper disparities they were designed to resolve. Quotas themselves are not the problem—rather, the implementation and its timeline are.

For Projek30%, the initiative's leaders have consistently expressed their desire to set up post-implementation policies to compliment the uptick in female political participation. Currently, only 13.5% of Dewan Rakyat seats are held by women, a stark contrast with Singapore's 32.3% and the world average of 27.5%. In a patriarchal society where men hold the majority of decision-making power, it is important that a catalyst, such as a quota system, be implemented so that marginalised groups can get their foot in the door. Reinforcing the fact that female candidates still need to be elected in order to gain power, the 30% minimum quota does not make women a passive beneficiary, instead, it provides a pathway for greater participation that may prevent qualified women from entering politics.

From the women's march to parliament, there was an expectation to learn more about a policy proposal; instead, the event prompted reflection on why a policy mechanism designed to address inequality was scrutinised more than the inequalities themselves. The most important idea worth knowing is not necessarily whether or not quotas in itself are inherently good or bad, but rather understanding the situation and concerns that lead people to call for them. Quotas should never be the destination, but should be the pathway towards a society where they are no longer needed.

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RETHINKING DIGITALIZATION IN MALAYSIA

Critical Analysis

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Malaysia has emerged as one of Southeast Asia's fastest-growing digital economies. In recent years, the country has outpaced regional growth projections – driven by sustained investments in digital infrastructure – the expansion of broadband connectivity, and the rapid adoption of digital technologies across both the public and private sectors (The Star, 2025). More recently, digital transformation has become a central pillar of Malaysia's national development agenda through the Thirteenth Malaysia Plan, the establishment of the National AI Office (NAIO), and the forthcoming National AI Masterplan 2030, signalling the government's ambition to position Malaysia as a competitive digital nation.

This ambition is increasingly reflected in the country's economic performance. The digital economy contributed 22.6% of Malaysia's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2021, with its share projected to reach 25.5% by 2025 (Jusoh, 2025). National strategies such as the Malaysia Digital Economy Blueprint (MyDIGITAL), the Twelfth Malaysia Plan (and then subsequently, relevance to the Thirteenth) and the creation of the National AI Office collectively demonstrate a deliberate policy shift towards building a digitally enabled economy capable of supporting innovation, productivity and long-term economic competitiveness (Economic Planning Unit, 2021; Ministry of Digital, 2024).

By conventional measures, Malaysia's digital transformation appears to be progressing successfully. According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM), 97.1% of Malaysian households had Internet access in 2025, while 98.3% of individuals were Internet users (Department of Statistics Malaysia [DOSM], 2026). Smartphone ownership has become almost universal, digital banking is firmly embedded in everyday life, government services are increasingly delivered through digital platforms, and Malaysians routinely rely on online technologies for communication, education, commerce and entertainment. Digital connectivity has become an ordinary feature of daily life rather than a technological privilege.

Viewed through these indicators, Malaysia appears to have largely overcome what Van Dijk (2005) describes as the first-level digital divide: the unequal distribution of digital infrastructure and Internet access. The country

has made significant progress in extending broadband coverage, expanding mobile connectivity and lowering barriers to digital participation, reflecting decades of sustained public investment in digital infrastructure (Ragnedda, 2017; Van Dijk, 2005). Yet, these impressive achievements raise a more fundamental question in asking what digital maturity really means.

Statistics remain valuable measures of progress, but they provide only a partial picture of digital transformation. Indicators such as Internet penetration, broadband subscriptions and smartphone ownership measure connectivity, yet reveal comparatively little about how individuals experience digitalisation, whether they possess the capabilities to participate meaningfully in digital society, or whether digital technologies ultimately improve their economic and social opportunities.

This distinction has become increasingly important because the nature of the digital divide itself has evolved. Two decades ago, governments quite rightly prioritised expanding digital infrastructure and increasing Internet access. Today, however, many digitally connected countries, including Malaysia, face a different challenge. The central policy question is no longer whether citizens are connected, but whether they possess the capabilities, opportunities and institutional support required to transform digital access into meaningful educational, economic and social outcomes.

Experiences from other digitally advanced economies illustrate this transition. South Korea (an OECD country) demonstrates that high levels of connectivity do not automatically translate into gender-equitable digital empowerment. Although women and men enjoy broadly comparable access to digital technologies, women remain underrepresented in ICT occupations, digital innovation and technology entrepreneurship. More broadly, the OECD Digital Economy Outlook 2024 reports that women account for only 11–24% of ICT specialists across OECD member countries, making men approximately three to eight times more likely to work in ICT specialist roles. In fact, at current rates of progress, the OECD estimates that achieving gender parity within the ICT workforce could take almost 90 years. Women also remain underrepresented among digital entrepreneurs, inventors and technology researchers, illustrating that digital inequality in advanced economies increasingly manifests not through unequal access, but through unequal participation and unequal outcomes (OECD, 2024).

Malaysia is approaching a similar inflection point. Having made substantial progress in closing the first-level digital divide, the country's next challenge is no longer one of connectivity, but of capability. As Malaysia enters the next phase of its digital transformation, measuring success solely through infrastructure and access risks overlooking the more complex inequalities that determine whether individuals, businesses and communities are truly able to benefit from an increasingly digital economy.

The Evolution of the Digital Divide

The concept of the digital divide has undergone a significant transformation over the past three decades. What was once understood primarily as a problem of physical access to technology has evolved into a broader discussion about digital capabilities, participation and the unequal benefits that individuals derive from living in an increasingly digital society.

During the late 1990s and early 2000s, digital inequality was largely viewed through the lens of access. Governments and international organisations focused on whether individuals owned computers, had Internet connections or lived within areas served by telecommunications infrastructure (Norris, 2001). At the time, this approach was both necessary and appropriate, as broadband infrastructure remained limited, personal computers represented a considerable financial investment for many households, and Internet connectivity was far from universal. Consequently, reducing digital inequality meant expanding infrastructure, lowering the cost of access and extending connectivity to underserved communities.

Malaysia's own digital transformation closely reflected this global trajectory. Through sustained public investment in broadband expansion, mobile connectivity and digital infrastructure, Internet access has gradually evolved from a luxury into an essential public utility. Today's high levels of household connectivity are a testament to the success of these long-term investments. However, scholars soon recognised that improving access alone did not eliminate digital inequality.

Hargittai (2002) demonstrated that individuals

with similar levels of Internet access often exhibited markedly different levels of online competence. While some users navigated digital environments confidently, evaluated information critically and leveraged online resources for education and employment, others struggled with relatively simple digital tasks. The question therefore shifted from who had access to who possessed the skills to use digital technologies effectively. This marked the emergence of what later became known as the second-level digital divide, placing digital literacy, confidence and capability at the centre of digital inclusion debates.

Subsequent research extended this argument even further. Van Deursen and Van Dijk (2014) observed that individuals with comparable digital skills did not necessarily experience comparable benefits from digital participation. One individual might secure better employment, establish a successful business or pursue lifelong learning opportunities, while another, despite similar levels of digital competence, derived comparatively limited economic or social returns. Building on this work, Ragnedda (2017) conceptualised the third-level digital divide, highlighting inequalities in the social, economic and civic outcomes generated through digital engagement.

This evolution fundamentally reshaped the understanding of digital inclusion. Digital inequality was no longer viewed simply as a question of connectivity or technological access. Rather, it became increasingly concerned with whether individuals possessed the capabilities, confidence and opportunities to transform digital participation into tangible improvements in their quality of life.

For countries such as Malaysia, this distinction is particularly important. While expanding broadband infrastructure and increasing Internet penetration remain essential foundations, they are no longer sufficient indicators of digital progress. As digital technologies become embedded across education, employment, entrepreneurship and public service delivery, measuring digital maturity requires moving beyond infrastructure to examine how effectively citizens are able to participate in, and benefit from, the digital economy.

Understanding Malaysia Through Van Dijk's Framework

Among the most influential contributions to contemporary digital divide scholarship is Jan van Dijk's Model of Successive Kinds of Access (Van Dijk, 2005). Rather than viewing digital inclusion as a binary distinction between those who are connected and those who are excluded, Van Dijk argues that meaningful digital participation develops through four successive and interconnected forms of access:

1. Motivational Access refers to an individual's willingness, confidence and perceived value in engaging with digital technologies.
2. Material Access concerns access to devices, Internet connectivity and the supporting digital infrastructure.
3. Skills Access encompasses the competencies required to navigate, evaluate and use digital technologies effectively.
4. Usage Access reflects the extent to which individuals are able to apply digital technologies strategically to generate meaningful educational, economic and social outcomes.

Importantly, these four dimensions are cumulative, and build upon each other, rather than independent. Material access provides the foundation for digital participation, but it does not, by itself, guarantee digital inclusion. Individuals must also possess the motivation to adopt technology, the skills to use it effectively and the opportunities to translate those skills into meaningful outcomes.

Viewed through Van Dijk's framework, Malaysia's digitalisation journey presents an important paradox: On the one hand, the country has made remarkable progress in expanding material access. National broadband coverage continues to improve, smartphone ownership is widespread, and Internet penetration has reached near-universal levels. These achievements represent a significant public policy success and should not be understatedOn the other hand, material access represents only one stage of digital inclusion. The more pressing policy questions now concern motivational access, skills access and usage access, particularly among vulnerable and historically underserved communities.

Do Malaysians possess sufficient confidence to embrace emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence? Are small and medium enterprises equipped to integrate AI into their

business operations? Can students critically evaluate digital information in an era of misinformation? Are workers sufficiently prepared for increasingly digital and AI-enabled labour markets?

These questions suggest that Malaysia's next phase of digital transformation should not be measured solely by the expansion of digital infrastructure, but by the extent to which individuals are empowered to participate meaningfully in the digital economy. Until these dimensions are addressed, conventional indicators such as Internet penetration and broadband coverage provide only a partial account of Malaysia's digital progress. The challenge is no longer connecting Malaysians to the Internet, it is ensuring that connectivity translates into capability, opportunity and long-term socioeconomic empowerment.

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A WORLD OUTGROWING ITS INSTITUTIONS

Critical Analysis

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The world is shifting: at the root lies the challenge of good governance, with global health serving as a critical lens through which these transformations can be understood.

Within the many institutions that are working on health, coordination remains weak. From the World Bank to the International Labour Organization, G7/G20 initiatives, Ministries, and Bilateral Programmes, global health does not suffer from a shortage of institutions; it suffers from an excess of them.

Historically, high-income countries have financed, influenced agendas, and shaped global institutions, while low- and middle-income countries have implemented programmes, provided data, and borne the consequences. A future reformed architecture must move toward true democratic governance that allows LMICs to exercise equal influence in agenda-setting, financing decisions, and institutional leadership.

In conjunction with the United Nations 80th Anniversary, the UN80 Reform initiative is framed as a necessary transformation in examining efficiency, duplication, operational reform, financial sustainability, and institutional coherence. In another sense, it is an open secret that this reform conversation reflects increasing pressure on the UN system due to declining donor confidence, geopolitical fragmentation, expanding humanitarian crises, and budget constraints.

In many ways, UN80 represents less a streamlining process of the multilateral system and more an institutional survival exercise; an attempt to preserve UN relevance, reduce costs, and manage geopolitical decline without confronting directly the power imbalances that increasingly make the UN system ineffective which risks it becoming a beautifully wrapped box with nothing inside. The challenge is no longer building bridges but asking why so many lead nowhere.

Reform Is Necessary, but Reform Risks Weakening Global Public Goods

The United Nations Charter and broader UN system were built upon assumptions of the 1950s. From infectious disease control to climate–health interactions, from national sovereignty to global interdependence, from state actors to non-state actors, and from acute crises to chronic complex crises, the institutions, governance arrangements, financing systems, and accountability mechanisms, that underpin global health security have not fully adapted to the realities of rapidly changing health challenges.

Calls for efficiency-driven reform in global health must recognise that streamlining does not always strengthen systems. In some cases, it may lead to reduced funding, consolidation of institutions, or the loss of specialised expertise in advocacy capacity. Global health is not a corporate structure designed solely for optimisation; it is a complex ecosystem where multiple actors serve different political,

technical, and societal functions. Therefore, what appears as duplication may, in fact, represent resilience by preserving accountability mechanisms and diverse representation for communities most affected by health inequalities.

This tension is particularly evident in the proposed merger between the UN Population Fund and UN Women. The proposal emerged from concerns about institutional overlap, as both agencies work on interconnected issues including gender equality, women's rights, sexual and reproductive health, gender-based violence, and adolescent girls'empowerment. From an efficiency perspective, combining the two institutions could create a more unified UN platform with greater political influence, technical expertise and operational capacity to advance women's health and rights.

However, the potential benefits of consolidation must be weighed against the distinctive roles these agencies currently serve. UN Women was established primarily as a normative institution focused on advancing gender equality and strengthening global advocacy, while UN Population Fund brings specialised expertise in population dynamics, reproductive health, and demographic change. A merger could create opportunities for greater coordination, but it also raised questions about whether their respective unique technical expertise, institutional identities, and advocacy functions may be diluted in the process. This illustrates a broader challenge in global health reform: reducing duplication does not always mean eliminating overlap as some forms of institutional diversity are essential for maintaining resilience, representation, and accountability.

Yet, the risk is that reproductive health becomes politically diluted, a footnote within a broader agenda rather than remaining a priority at the centre of women's health. A broader gender institution may shift focus toward policy advocacy, equality frameworks, and social empowerment. Institutional identities matter because they are not only administrative structures; they carry accumulated expertise, relationships, and political purposes that shape how global health issues are understood and addressed. Maternal mortality reduction, for example, requires obstetric expertise, supply chains, skilled birth attendants, and strong emergency referral systems. Advocacy alone cannot substitute for health system capacity.

Governance, the Health Workforce Crisis and Health Financing

A simplified pattern exists within the global health workforce system: high-income countries recruit internationally trained healthcare workers, while low- and middle-income countries invest in training them. The result is a global subsidy in which poorer countries often finance the education of health workers who later migrate elsewhere.

This creates a fundamental tension: global health aspires to achieve universal health coverage while many countries lack the workforce necessary to deliver it. A paradox emerges when efforts to expand essential health services and strengthen health workforce capacity through greater investment in training can coincide with increased migration, worsening workforce shortages, and continued health system fragility.

The health workforce crisis cannot be solved solely by increasing medical school enrolment or training more nurses. It requires a governance solution: global agreements on ethical recruitment, fair compensation, workforce retention, rural incentives, and improved working conditions. The workforce crisis is fundamentally a global labour governance problem.

The current global health financing model relies heavily on voluntary donor contributions, philanthropic funding, and external aid. This creates structural vulnerability of unstable budgets, unequal power, and priority distortion. Sustainable financing requires moving from aid toward investment, enabling integrated health systems capable of addressing pandemics, climate change, non-communicable diseases, maternal health challenges, and workforce shortages.

A donor-dependent system risks prioritising donor interests, where funding availability influences programme priorities rather than allowing global support to align with national strategies and population health needs. This contributes to vertical programmes and fragmented mandates that do not adequately strengthen primary healthcare, health workforce development, health infrastructure, or responses to non-communicable diseases.

Sustainable global health financing requires moving beyond short-term aid models toward

long-term investment approaches that strengthen health systems.

The crisis of global health governance is not primarily a crisis of institutional capacity, but a crisis of misalignment within the global architecture and its relationship with communities. The key question for reform should be: can global health governance become accountable to communities rather than only to member states? The future architecture requires stronger civil society participation, meaningful youth and child representation, community advisory mechanisms, and greater transparency in decision-making.

A defining moment in global health will be whether current reforms reproduce historical inequalities or whether they can redistribute power. Institutional reform without power redistribution is cosmetic, rearranging the furniture does not change who owns the house. Changing organisational structures does not change who defines priorities, who controls resources, or whose knowledge is considered authoritative.

Successful reform should not only ask how the UN can become more efficient; it should ask how global governance can become more representative.

With increasing geopolitical competition, declining trust in global institutions, and renewed emphasis on sovereignty, the future of global health depends not only on stronger institutions but also on more equitable systems of power, accountability, financing, and knowledge.

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READY AT SIX? UNDERSTANDING THE STANDARD ONE REFORM

Opinion

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Educational reforms are often judged by the changes they announce, rather than by the systems required to deliver them. Yet, as experiences across education systems demonstrate - the effectiveness of reform frequently depends less on policy design alone than on the quality of its implementation.

This distinction is particularly important in the case of Malaysia's proposed reduction of the Standard One entry age. Allowing children to begin formal schooling earlier may expand educational opportunities and strengthen foundational learning. However, without sufficient preparation, the reform may also create unintended consequences, including increased pressure on younger children, greater demands on teachers and widening differences between students from different socio-economic backgrounds.

The central question is not whether six-year-olds are capable of entering Standard One, it is whether Malaysia's education system is prepared to receive them effectively. Understanding the reform requires examining not only children's developmental readiness, but also school capacity, teacher preparedness, communication with families, international evidence and issues of educational equity.

Earlier this year, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim unveiled Malaysia's new ten-year education blueprint under the Rancangan Pendidikan Negara (2026–2035), outlining a series of reforms intended to reshape the country's education system. Among the various proposals announced, one reform quickly became the focus of public attention: beginning in 2027, parents will have the option of enrolling their children into Standard One at the age of six rather than seven.

Just several months after the announcement, the Ministry of Education reported receiving only 73,386 applications for six-year-old pupils entering Year One in 2027, representing approximately 18% of the original projection. Deputy Education Minister Wong Kah Woh described this as reflecting parents' confidence in both their children's readiness and the education system's capacity to support the reform. Nevertheless, the figures also indicate that a substantial proportion of eligible families have chosen not to participate during the initial phase. This variation in enrollment should not necessarily be interpreted as either support or opposition to the policy. Rather, it reflects the uncertainty that commonly accompanies major educational reform, particularly where details of its execution remain only partially understood by those expected to make decisions on behalf of young children.

This uncertainty is politically and educationally significant because reforms cannot be executed solely through legislation. They depend upon coordinated action by schools,

teachers, preschool providers and families. Where guidance remains limited, parents are required to make important educational decisions without a clear understanding of how the proposed changes will affect children's learning experiences. Consequently, evaluating the reform requires understanding not merely what has changed, but how those changes will be translated into classroom practice.

Public debate has largely focused on whether six-year-old children are developmentally ready to begin primary school. While this question is understandable, it provides only a partial basis upon which to evaluate the reform. Readiness for school extends considerably beyond chronological age and encompasses multiple domains of child development, including language acquisition, cognitive development, emotional maturity, self-regulation, independence and social competence. These characteristics influence children's capacity to adapt successfully to the routines and academic expectations of formal schooling.

Importantly, children do not begin primary school from identical starting points. Differences in home learning environments, nutrition, language exposure, preschool participation and family resources shape developmental readiness long before children enter the classroom. Consequently, the same policy may produce different outcomes for different groups of children. Earlier school entry may provide additional opportunities for some learners whilst presenting greater adjustment challenges for others. The effectiveness of the reform therefore depends not only upon children's readiness but also upon the education system's capacity to accommodate these differences.

For this reason, school readiness should not be viewed solely as an individual characteristic. Rather, it is also an institutional responsibility. If children enter school with varying developmental profiles, schools must possess the capacity to respond through appropriate curriculum design, differentiated instruction and early intervention. Without such support, earlier entry may inadvertently increase developmental disparities rather than reduce them.

The success of educational reform ultimately depends upon institutional readiness. Primary schools will be expected to receive younger learners whose developmental needs differ from those traditionally encountered in Standard One. Consequently, implementation requires more than changes to enrolment policy. It also requires corresponding adjustments to classroom practice, teacher preparation and educational support systems.

Teacher capacity represents one of the most important dimensions of institutional readiness. Younger cohorts generally require greater emphasis on establishing routines, supporting emotional regulation, developing foundational literacy and numeracy, and maintaining close communication with families. These responsibilities demand specialised pedagogical knowledge alongside sustained professional development. As a preschool teacher, we still have not received any guidelines in regards to preparing the children's revised entry into Standard one. In the absence of clearly articulated expectations from the primary education system, preschools remain largely dependent upon existing practices while attempting to anticipate future requirements.

The government has recognised some of these challenges by allocating an additional RM800 million to address immediate educational needs, including the recruitment and training of approximately 18,000 new teachers. This investment demonstrates an awareness that successful reform requires strengthening educational capacity. Financial investment alone, however, does not guarantee effective implementation. With the optional phase scheduled to begin in 2027, the available timeframe for curriculum adaptation, teacher preparation, administrative coordination and public communication remains relatively limited. Moreover, challenges will not be confined to the first year of the reform. Resource pressures associated with overlapping cohorts and increased variation in learner readiness are likely to extend into subsequent years, requiring sustained institutional support rather than short-term intervention.

The implications extend beyond classroom practice to questions of educational equity. Although participation in the reform remains optional, the capacity to exercise that choice is unlikely to be distributed equally across Malaysian families. Parents with greater financial resources may choose to provide an additional year of preschool education, enrichment or childcare if they believe their children would benefit from delayed entry. Other families may

enroll children earlier because financial circumstances limit alternative options. Educational choices therefore reflect not only parental preference but also socio-economic conditions.

These differences are particularly significant because children entering Standard One already vary considerably in their developmental experiences. Without adequate support mechanisms, earlier school entry may disproportionately benefit children who have previously accessed high-quality preschool education while increasing adjustment difficulties among children from less advantaged backgrounds. A reform intended to expand educational opportunity may therefore unintentionally widen existing inequalities if institutional support remains uneven.

Educational reforms are often evaluated according to the policies governments announce. However, policy announcements represent only the starting point of educational change. Their ultimate success depends upon whether the institutions responsible possess the capacity to translate policy into meaningful educational outcomes. Malaysia's proposal to lower the Standard One entry age illustrates this broader principle. Public debate has understandably focused on whether six-year-old children are ready to begin primary school. Yet, as this discussion has shown, the more fundamental questions concern whether schools are prepared to support younger learners, whether teachers have received the necessary training, whether parents have been given sufficient guidance to make informed decisions, and whether the reform can be executed equitably across diverse educational contexts.

Restructuring the education system is not just about what governments propose, but the conditions under which those proposals can succeed; school entry age alone cannot determine educational quality. Malaysia's decision to allow children to enter Standard One at the age of six may ultimately prove beneficial, or it may require further refinement as implementation progresses. Its success however, will depend far less on the age specified in policy documents than on the quality of implementation across classrooms, schools and communities.

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THE IRONY AND CHALLENGES OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: ASSESSING THE ASEAN DILEMMA AMIDST GLOBAL CROSSROADS AND IMPACTFUL TRADE-OFFS.

Critical Analysis

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Irony presents itself from the Brundtland Report of *Sustainable Development* as "Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (WCED, 1987).

The report considered that using up our planetary resources faster than we could regenerate would be a debt for future generations and this should be something we should avoid at all cost. This should be the responsibility of every single government and human on this planet.

A recent survey by the Real Estate and Housing Developer's Association (REHDA) in Malaysia reflected that a total of 17,971 residential units were launched, but the take up rate was only at 21 percent and at best, the industry remained cautiously optimistic for 2026 (Loheswar, R (2026)). Putting aside the financial root cause, one would wonder about the environmental damage and loss that was incurred for projects that have no demand and yet, similar models are still being developed. Logically, housing developments should be in line with need and with the increased cost of living; more reasonable projects should be considered in line with economic considerations. Then of course there are other issues such as possible land grab and corruption as well that could be present in some of these cases. Unfortunately, this is just one of the many examples that is prevalent globally.

The current focus seems to be more on glorified national and corporate reporting which at times may border on stretched or fraudulent reports. The annual international climate meetings organized by the United Nations known as the Conference of the Parties (COP) have acknowledged and discussed the issue of climate disinformation for the past few years with a sense of urgency. In last year's COP30, 12 nations have initially signed the first-ever Declaration on Information Integrity and Climate Change, aimed to fight back against flood of false content and protect those on the frontlines of truth. It was a strong acknowledgement on the severity of climate disinformation and a consideration of information laundering where false claims are cycled through multiple platforms to appear credible (de Carvalho, 2025). Similarly, corporate reporting and

sustainability standards as well as frameworks have been pushing for a move from internal to external assurance as well as a move from limited to reasonable assurance.

Though all these initiatives are positive and would lead to greater reliance on information that is being reported, it is important to also understand that corporations as well as governments may face immense difficulties to obtain and verify the information data. This also includes the increasing cost of reporting and assurance taking into account data protection and privacy, cost of storage and intensive capital expenditures to change technology platforms. These initiatives may not even be possible over the short or medium term that would significantly impact the performance and achievement of these initiatives. There may also not be integrated platforms that are connecting public-private-individuals to gather relevant information and data hence the need to forecast and analyze based on assumptions. The transition from just financial materiality to double materiality extends the scope well. However, it will take time for organizations to understand the impact of their decisions in line with sustainability matters and to assess the risk, especially on the longer-term perspective. As put forward by the 1987 Brundtland Commission Report, the precautionary principle states that a lack of full scientific certainty should not be used as a reason to postpone action against serious or irreversible environmental harm though it does recommend that if a new chemical's long-term effects are unknown, the precautionary approach favours caution until more is understood.

Multilateralism and cooperation amongst institutions and countries play a significant role here. When looking at the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG, 17 SDG's were adopted by the 193 member states of the United Nations on 25th September 2015 with various targets to be achieved by 2030. The Sustainable Development Report in 2026 however, paints a rather dismal picture of the SDG progression. Whilst acknowledging its worth, the report also mentions that the goals are highly ambitious and will not be achieved by the target date of 2030. The report is realistic and acknowledges the limitation that the world is not organized properly to achieve what needs to be accomplished and hence, progress is slow. This is accelerated by the spreading war and climate change challenging the norms of multilateralism. As we bulldoze towards 2030 and as mentioned earlier in this article, it is alarming to note that there are still some SDG's targets and indicators that have no data let alone have any progression as indicated in both Figure 1 and Figure 2.

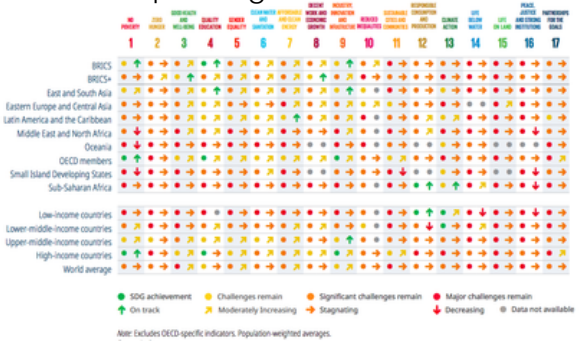
Figure 1: World SDG Dashboard 2026



Source: Sachs et al (2026)

As per Figure 1 above, out of the seventeen (17) goals, only four (4) have improved moderately, which are Goal 3 Good Health and Well Being, Goal 5 Gender Equality, Goal 7 Affordable and Clean Energy and Goal 9 Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure. The others remain somewhat stagnant. Five (5) goals face major challenges including Goal 14 Life Below Water, Goal 15 Life on Land and Goal 16 Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions as well as Goal 3 Good Health and Well Being and Goal 11 Sustainable Cities and Communities.

Figure 2: 2026 SDG Dashboard by Region and Income Group (Ratings and Trends)



Source: Sachs et al (2026)

Figure 2 above expands the SDG report by region and income. Unavailable data is noted in Goal 4 Quality Education, Goal 8 Decent Work and Economic Growth, Goal 10 Reduced Inequalities, Goal 12 Responsible Consumption and Production Goal 14 Life Below Water, Goal 15 Life on Land and Goal 16 Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions. Low-income countries reflect two SDG achievements for Goal 12 Responsible Consumption and Production and 13 Climate Action. High-income countries reflect three SDG achievements for Goal 1 No Poverty, Goal 4 Quality Education and Goal 9

Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure.

It is also concerning to note that even with the renewed calls of urgency, Goal 13 Climate Action is relatively stagnant with significant challenges with the exception for Sub- Saharan Africa, low-income and lower-middle-income countries. High-income countries are also facing major challenges with stagnant performance when it is anticipated that these countries should be leading the initiatives in terms of Climate Action.

The current on-going experience of extreme heat has raised further concerns on global climate resilience and impact. Millions are experiencing extreme heat that has affected their daily life's, public health capacities, agriculture and energy systems. Heatwaves can overwhelm the healthcare system; increase wildlife risks and strain electricity grids as air conditioner usage reaches peak levels. Some European countries are already experiencing power outages as the current heatwave is straining the grid. Prolonged exposure will have more severe impacts for the overall planetary and living beings health, infrastructures and economy.

Figure 3: Forecast Highs for 30th June 2026



Source: CNN Weather (2026)

Europe is suffering under a fierce heat dome (a large area of high atmospheric pressure that traps hot air over a region for days or weeks, causing temperatures to climb well above normal) that will have significant impacts for the fastest-warming continent. Figure 3 reports the forecast weather across major cities in Europe for 1st July 2026 with governments already indicating an anticipated increase in temperatures beyond the above forecast and countries like UK have also issued "Red Extreme Heat Warnings" and France comparing the current heatwave to the one in 2003 that killed almost 15,000 people. France, Spain and Italy are considered as the most exposed economies to the growing economic costs of extreme heat which could reduce output by as much as 7% in some countries by 2030 (Katanich, 2026). The article also mentions that once temperatures exceed 30°C; labour productivity falls by around 3%; energy demands increase by roughly 1.2% per degree as households and businesses rely more heavily on cooling which would also cause a double whammy as Europe's power mix still relies heavily on thermoelectric generation which depend on water availability and cooling efficiency.

Globally, the share of working hours lost to heat stress is projected to rise from 1.4% in 1995 to 2.2% by 2030 with much higher losses anticipated in South Asia (Katanich, 2026). Southeast Asia is set to see a warmer-than-usual early summer, which is predicted to raise power demand for fuel and at the same time , will strain power grids; with an 80 – 100% chance of above-normal temperatures across Indonesia and Malaysia initially and then expected to expand to mainland Southeast Asia (Bloomberg, 2026). Concurrently, the Singapore Institute of International Affairs (SIIA) has also put South-East Asia on red alert for an elevated haze risk especially for Malaysia, Brunei, Indonesia and Singapore (The Star , 2026). The news article also reported growing concerns over the return of El Nino conditions in 2026 which raises the possibility of a stronger and more prolonged dry season, aggravated by a potential positive Indian Ocean Depole (IOD) which could further intensify the weather conditions and increase the risk of fire. None of the above provides a positive forecast. A prolonged drought through the remaining months of 2026 could lead to food shortages and spikes in prices of food and other necessities, pushing millions back into poverty.

Considering that many are still recovering from the post-Covid impact and the current global wars and other uncertainties, the repercussions are going to be significant. The growing number of individuals that are becoming homeless especially amongst the elderly individuals that are alone or have been abandoned is also increasing. In Malaysia, 7,862 homeless persons were recorded and registered from 2021 to 2025 (Yusuf, 2026). This does not include the numbers that have not been registered. Although there are many initiatives such as transit centers etc.; more assistance and outreach programmes need to be in place especially when taking into account the growing number of unemployed individuals. The Star (2026a) reported that

Malaysia's unemployment rate had returned to 3.0% in April 2026, with 511,800 unemployed persons recorded. Separately, it is important to also consider statistics involving foreign workers (with and without permits) that could also be facing financial issues or from labour and human rights perspectives, which is unfortunately still a pressing issue within ASEAN. Another challenge that is prevalent across ASEAN is the lack of coordinated definitions, concepts and measures for poverty as well as the collection of data (ASEAN,2025).

A major concern noted in the SDG Report is the somewhat relaxed approach towards Goal 14 Life Below Water and Goal 15 Life on Land. Southeast Asia's biodiversity is under severe threat caused by the encroachment of cities and farms, deforestation, warning seas and the trafficking of rare wildlife for food, traditional medicines and as pets (Jones, 2026). The article refers to the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) that reports that more than 4,300 species across Southeast Asia were "critically endangered" or "endangered", citing the Javan and Sumatran rhinos as well as the Cat Ba Langur from Vietnam as down to the last few dozens, and the Soala (Laos) may already be extinct. ASEAN is considered an illegal wildlife trade (IWT) hotspot where import, export and other illegal trade transactions involving wildlife are conducted with relative ease (ASEAN, 2023). There are increasing global initiatives and local ASEAN cooperation to collectively combat this phenomenon. As an example, Bernama (2026) had reported that there had been a series of high-profile seizures of endangered animals and wildlife products across Laos and Thailand that had exposed a flourishing black market that is harming countless species in the wild. In this case, the animals were being transported using international passenger buses, there were even those that used airlines and other forms of visible transport. Although the species are not native to Laos, they had been trafficked across the border as ASEAN is vastly linked by land and sea and various illegal routes can be creatively organized especially when corruption is involved. The article also cited a report from UNODC that claimed the global wildlife trade is worth nearly US$10 billion making it as lucrative as the trafficking of humans, narcotics and arms trade. Although it may be easier to blame governments for turning a blind eye towards this, it is also important to consider the participation of corporations and even individuals in these activities. As an example, several NGOs accused Meta of hosting the world's "largest single known illegal wildlife trade market" and effectively encouraging the trade by sharing advertising revenues with users and allowing them subscription models including across ASEAN member countries based on the findings of over 20,000 adverts for more than 260,000 wildlife products on social media platforms between April 2024 and March 2026.

Plastic pollution is another significant environmental challenge in ASEAN with over 31 million tonnes of plastic waste generated annually across six ASEAN member states, contributing to marine debris with plastic accounting for approximately 80% of all marine debris in the ocean (ASEAN, 2026). Though there have been efforts to create awareness, implement initiatives to manage waste and considerations of circular economies: there is still a huge gap in preventing marine litter and driving sustainable change across the region. This would also impact marine life and the health implications for those that consume ocean based food resources.

The battle to survive in current challenging circumstances is an individual effort aligned to the bigger picture. The consequences of the dilemma have to be faced, on whether to focus on convenience and business as usual and sabotage our chances of surviving or to respond to nature's response to us with urgency. The current status of no data or vague and ambiguous data with various assumptions is alarming as we are nowhere close to a conclusive solution. The answer to " are humans climate resilient" involves scary statistics.

Although it is encouraging to see innovations and initiatives that are attempting to add value, it is important that key stakeholders and leaders keep an eye on the final deliverable. It is an ongoing process as innovations and new technology would also cause new risks to turn up and possible long-term dilemmas and effects that have not been considered. Experiencing first-hand consequences of past greed and inaction would be a wake-up call to address sustainable development practically and with a renewed sense of urgency.

The cross roads are clear, with every step mattering. On a wishful thinking basis, platforms and data need to be more reflective and connected to show how each decision and

step makes a difference to cause any impact. Though with the ongoing conflicts, disputes, corruption and discrimination, this may be hard to envision, leading to a definite disaster especially if there is a continuing trend of putting "greed" over "need".

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WHAT MATTERS: SKILL OR VALUE?

Opinion

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In an era where leadership development often focuses on competencies, certifications, communication techniques, and strategic thinking, an important question deserves reflection: What matters more in leadership – skill or value?

At the recently concluded 39th WAGGGS World Conference held in Siem Reap, Cambodia, from 15th to 19th June 2026, a powerful reminder that "everyone can be a leader" was the main message. What is good leadership? Over the past months, there have been many incidents and impactful programmes held at various levels where remarks were insightful, and at times, rather alarming.

No doubt, skills are important in leadership. However, they may be overemphasised to some extent in defining what that leadership is or the quality of a leader. For instance, a leader may have been denied a training opportunity for not possessing the right set of skills: leadership skills have been given disproportionate attention in many instances, often at the expense of something equally important, if not more important, that is called values.

When weighing the competency of one's leadership, someone with soft skills and other talents, could lack strong values that may not benefit an organisation. Conversely, it may be a risk to the organisation. Skills need to be accompanied by values; otherwise, it may be harmful. For example, a skilled speaker who manipulates facts and creates division, while a leader with modest skills but strong integrity may develop others and earn trust.

From the historical Jade Camp 2026 that made headlines in the Asia Records and ASEAN Records, to the nomination process for positions and awards, the campaigning for positions and motions at various levels, such as state AGM, national AGM, and World Conference internationally, these experiences share important insights and facts.

Personal values, societal and moral values play critical roles in determining the future of an organisation. Values are fundamental principles, beliefs or standards that guide one's behaviour and choices, including honesty, empathy, independence, or ambition. In a nutshell, skills determine capability, but values determine direction and trust.

While everyone can be trained to be a leader, skills are generally easier to acquire, while values are more challenging to instill or change, especially in adulthood, when one is already experienced.

Values are the core and ethical compass to make appropriate decisions, not for one's own interest but for the benefit of the organisation or the community involved. Without values, one may still serve effectively and efficiently but may be subject to the risk of self-interest, compromised by circumstances and other challenges that may sway the direction of the leader and/or the organisations s/he leads.

While there is no intention of suggesting that skills are unimportant in leadership, it is a reminder to reflect on the contemporary trend that may overemphasise skills and competency levels in comparison with values, character, and trust. In a situation where the nation observes a trust deficit among our political leaders, this clearly reflects ongoing discourse on the importance of values over skills. Our political leaders may have excellent oratory skills that can convince voters and other skills useful for the planning and development of the country, but skills do not automatically translate into trust.

Trust is built on character, not competence. With that, it is important to evaluate and reassess leadership not merely based on skills, but also on values, which are relatively more important traits in a leader. Leadership is not merely about what a person can do. It is equally, if not more importantly, about who that person chooses to be.

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